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SWISS LITERATURE OF OUR DAYS

A Try for an Inventory

by

Dr. Heinrich Meyer

Professor of German, Vanderbilt University

I

The immediate cause for this study was the wish of Professor Vlach, Editor of the international periodical, Books Abroad, to have within the frame of the Modern Language Association of America annual reports about current events in the literary world. Though born a German, I offered my services for a survey of Swiss literature during the year 1965, as nobody else here had ever attempted such an inventory. As professors of German literature we do mention and study Bodmer and Breitinger, Gotthelf, Keller and Meyer and perhaps even Frisch and Dürrenmatt, but there is no chair for German-Swiss literature in the United States and the interest in Swiss letters depends therefore on the goodwill, instinct, industry and other such endowments of individual professors whose real specialty may be far from Switzerland and its literature. We are here up against one of the major problems currently discussed in Swiss writings, the relation of the smaller language area that cannot support economically its literary talents to the larger area, in this case Germany where the number of potential book buyers is great enough to support a great many writers and talkers. Kurt Guggenheim, the Zürich essayist, novelist and amateur biologist, a man whom I would regard beside Heinrad Inglin as decidedly of Nobel Prize quality, remarked one time that the Germans take up Swiss literature always by couples, Bodmer, Breitinger or Heer, Zahn or Spitteler, Widmann etc., but where does this leave the unusual figures, like the former colleague of Einstein in the patent office, the designer of turbines and literary genius Wirz, whose posthumous book came out in a small edition this last year and has at this moment not yet been reviewed in the Neue Zürcher Zeitung? Yet this was a man who ranks next to Joyce and a bit above Kafka and others who became worldwide celebrities and keep an unknown number of publishers and editors and professors in bread and butter and whatever else may be desired. Will the Swiss recognize the exceptional genius or will they say that this man is too unusual ever to be of any general appeal? They will say the latter, for this is what they have said.

One voice to the contrary, that of the leading Swiss literary historian of our time, Professor Werner Günther of Neuchâtel, is not likely to change the general climate of literary appreciation. But suppose the publisher and some others were to push such a book rather than letting a Foundation subvention it and then proceeding to more average tasks of proven economic value, who would listen? If Wirz had been born an Irishman he would by now be read in all the courses in the humanities in the United States. After all, Joyce was an outsider and even forbidden for a while, yet
has been since accepted as naturally as any strained baby food on the grocery shelves. Yet not even the greatest writer of prose in German, the only literary figure of absolute greatness, Jeremiad Gotthelf, has gained world fame, though he surpasses Balzac and Dickens and Tolstoy and Dostoevsky by far, both as an artist and poetic genius. The critical edition that Dr. Eugen Rentsch started and that the younger Dr. Eugen Rentsch continued has had very little support and is still not quite completed. To print the lacking volumes, that are out of print now, the Eugen Rentsch-Verlag in Erlenbach depends on other successes. I know no other such example of unselfish devotion in any other Swiss publisher and want to call attention to it also because a new shorter edition, printed in Roman letters, Antiqua, is in the making with the same publisher and will, we hope, help further the completion of the great original edition that had the endorsement of Hermann Hesse and every other literary figure a generation ago when it was started. But Gotthelf is a clear example of what a small national language group is up against. It cannot itself support any major writer, but it also cannot make him known to others, unless the others want to discover him for themselves. Except for some Germans and for us German professors abroad nobody seems to be concerned with such issues. Yet the famed buildings and constructions and scientific discoveries of Egypt or Crete or Greece are long since gone; what remains is only what the literature reflects. The greatest scientific and commercial achievements of our days are not likely to fare differently, and it would seem to be necessary therefore for those of us, Swiss or non-Swiss, as are concerned with Swiss literature, to keep pushing it and making it more widely known. This then was my modest or rather immodest aim. At least I was free from regional or political bias and can therefore speak with greater impartiality than if I were emotionally more limited.

I may seem to be exaggerating the case by saying that I regard Kurt Guggenheim as a man of Nobel Prize caliber. Am I being emotional when I rate this Zurich writer, who became seventy on January 14, 1966, so highly? Perhaps a few words about him are in place. His first book, Entfesselung, appeared in 1934, followed by Sieben Tage in 1936, by Riedland in 1938. Humm called it one of the most beautiful books from Switzerland, and it is, indeed, a poetic tale that reminds one of the early Hamsun stories by the intensity of its atmosphere and beauty. Other titles, Wilder Urlaub (1941), reflecting like so many Swiss books, including one by the distinguished Professor and novelist Faesi, the recollections of army life and border defense, Die heimliche Reise (1945), Wir waren unser vier (1949) lead up to the great contemporary historical novel about Zurich itself, Alles in Allem, four beautiful volumes with Artemis (1952-1955), in one volume 1957. Der Friede des Herzens (1956), a series of plays, starting with Der heitere Lebensabend (1938), followed by Der sterbende Schwan (1943) and Das Friedensfest (1946), and a number of movie scenarios might be said to represent the middle period. Then come the mature works of recollection and social responsibility with the emphasis on the biological factor that love brings us into life.
and lets us grow and develop there: Sandkorn für Sandkorn. Die Begegnung mit J.R. Fabre (1959), Das offenbare Geheimnis (1961), Die Wahrheit unter dem Fliesseblatt (1960), Der Arzt vom Patienten aus gesehen (1963), the beautiful Tagebuch am Schanzengraben (1965), the two volumes of memoirs, Die frühen Jahre (1962), Salz des Meeres, Salz der Tränen (1964), and finally the integration of all these themes, not in the mechanical manner of modern fictional experimenters, but through his Keller book as the true union of country and citizen - who regards his land not as a mere domicile (Heimat oder Domizil? 1961)! Keller is seen by a fellow Zurichian, and the Zurich aspects of Keller's existence are brought out in Das Ende von Seldwyla (1965). As always in Guggenheim, who on his mother's side descended from rabbis who had been for centuries at home in Switzerland, the theme of the Jew is not bypassed, but emphasized. The richness of this aspect gives as much color to the four-volume Alles in Allem as it does throw light on Keller's bachelor existence. In many respects then, the book on Keller, a book on Zurich as well, is also a book on Guggenheim himself. It makes absorbing reading, far better than any thriller, for the thrill is internal, emotional, psychological. This is why I think Guggenheim is a great writer; he is obviously a great man however modest and burgherlike he may appear.

II

Those of us who have not spent a life-time in literary pursuits may not realize the tenuousness of literary reputation and the complete lack of evaluative standards in the domain of writing. All of science is based on precise measurements and conventions agreed upon; it is impossible for a physicist to declare that "acceleration" does not exist because it cannot be separated from motion itself and seen in isolation; it is not likely that a biologist will throw out the centrifuge or the microscope and insist that we can get along without these time-worn pieces of equipment. Yet the pushing generations of writers struggling for their place high up on the sunny trellis do exactly this and therefore condemn as much existing literature as possible to the domain of dead wood that had best be overgrown and pruned away. Their value system is the place in the sun. Yet letter printing is at the same time the only basis for survival, since only through printed papers and books enough contemporaries can be reached to make suppression impossible and since only the printed record is sufficiently uniform to guarantee a relatively permanent survival of civilization. Before one had identical copies in large numbers, any discovery was uncertain and could be lost or deliberately suppressed. The new age of electronics, which fosters oral communication, quick reaction, unchecked propaganda is therefore the great enemy of stability and a dangerous means of authoritarian control. The listener cannot turn back a page and think; he must listen or shut off the current. The more writers depend on radio and television for a living, the less permanent will their work be and the less significant will they become. It is a good sign that many of the writers who can not depend on teaching and similar positions for the support of their writing are not satisfied with working for
radio stations, but continue to use the audio-lingual approach merely as a means to subvention their real career as writers. But there is a danger here: the person who can get his "literary" enjoyment from a radio play or TV performance is getting conditioned thereby like Pavlov's dogs. He'll turn on the juice rather than look for substantial fare. He may be lost entirely to the realm of literature in printed form and thus to deliberate and critical and independent reactions. And those who live by conditioning others are not going to be unhappy over it either! It was, at any rate, startling to discover that the great majority of younger writers in Switzerland seem to write for some kind of Rundfunk or another.

Until about 1820, "Literatur" meant anything that was printed. There existed handbooks that included everything from forestry to fiction. These bibliographies, some of which are now being reprinted, had the great advantage of showing their users what all existed and thus suggesting some kind of dimensional analysis and proportional thought. Today there is next to nothing that could take over this function. Consequently the most vociferous and probably least important segment of literary activity, the literature of entertainment, has arrogated to itself the designation formerly used for all printed matter. It seems now as though only the novelists and poets were producing "literature". But it seems so only to them themselves! We others know, unfortunately, that with a hundred thousand scientific periodicals printing annually and an output of commercial and industrial and scientific and sociological and psychological and so on and on papers and books, far beyond our possible comprehension, the Belles Lettres that concerned the nineteenth century literary man dwindle to relative insignificance. We cannot keep up with our specialty, we simply cannot read all that is published on a certain process, patent, research project, let alone a fundamental entity like Plasma or, for that matter, plastics or drugs or cancer. And when we have done what we cannot do without, we feel like taking a swim or frying a steak in the patio rather than sitting down and reading a string of novels running to a thousand or more pages or scrutinizing the miseries a poet tells us about through a sequence of confessional verse volumes. And this is a handicap the poet and writer has not yet fully realized either; he can turn to the subliterary or barely literate reader who will be satisfied with simple fare and craftsmanlike entertainment, provided it really is entertaining to him or her, or he can write for himself and hope that someone will print him; but the people of equal caliber of mind or depth of soul may never hear about him or her; for they are reading professionally more than they can absorb and then must simply rest their eyes for the next day's work. Literary professors of literature are probably the only group that can devote itself to reading poets and novelists with a professional mind and an eye not overworked from other tasks. This is why so much literature is taking on a professional and professorial quality; it is meant for the inner circle. Specialization has won out! But again, this is not good. For professors can talk ad infinitum.
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radio stations, but continue to use the audio-lingual approach merely as a means to subvention their real career as writers. But there is a danger here: the person who can get his "literary" enjoyment from a radio play or TV performance is getting conditioned thereby like Pavlov's dogs. He'll turn on the juice rather than look for substantial fare. He may be lost entirely to the realm of literature in printed form and thus to deliberate and critical and independent reactions. And those who live by conditioning others are not going to be unhappy over it either! It was, at any rate, startling to discover that the great majority of younger writers in Switzerland seem to write for some kind of Rundfunk or another.

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But again, this is not good. For professors can talk ad infinitum.
about one author or one book and write many more books about one book, that in turn must then be discussed by others, until the "literature" about literature becomes the literature that is being read and talked about. People who actually read C.F. Meyer or Goethe are probably far scarcer than people who have read books about them and who therefore have long since reached the point of assuming that Goethe, C.F. Meyer or any other such "name" is securely established and clearly known. I once used to think so too, until I started reading the sources.

III

The Foundation Pro Helvetia subventioned a collection, published in 1964 by Artemis and edited by Margher and Witz, entitled Bestand und Versuch. Schweizer Schrifttum der Gegenwart, 923 pages in all. It contains 94 contributions in German, of which 12 are in dialect, 33 in French, and 15 each in Italian and Romaunsch. Hugo Leber edited younger authors, with Benziger, in 1964, in a book called Texte. But we know from the lists of writers that there are more than a few hundred Swiss authors. In fact the mere export of Swiss literature exceeds in value the export of Swiss chocolate. West Germany is the main buyer. A short table will give at one glance the information such statistics contain:

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<th>USA</th>
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This is in million Swiss Francs, and the figures are for 1964, the last year for which data were available. They were supplied to me by my favorite Swiss bookdealer, Herr Hans Rohr, 8024 Zürich, Oberdorfstr. 5, and are to be continued in future issues of the organ of the Schweizerische Buchhändler- und Verleger-Verein, Bern, Der Schweizer Buchhandel. According to this valuable periodical and its bibliographies, the Swiss publications of 1964 ran to almost five thousand titles, exactly 4941.

For our inventory we may point out that only 777 titles were Belles Lettres; juvenile literature was 292, history 352, Religion 396. Of the 777 pieces of mere literature, 631 were in German, 127 in French and 5 in Italian. The question is, of course, whether a new book of Professor Portmann in Basel or a paper, as yet unrecognized or securely tucked away in the laboratory of one of the great firms, may not before long seem to outweigh the entire 777 volumes meant to be nothing but "Literatur" for its own sake. But this is not for us to decide. For we cannot even determine from
these authoritative figures how much of it is actually Swiss. There are quite a few foreigners publishing with Swiss firms; for instance, a great many books of critical and literary importance—or what is taken for such in America—has been entrusted to Francke in Bern. But worse for statistics, a good many shrill Swiss authors publish in Germany and sell therefore much more widely than if they were staying at home; thus their books too will not appear in the Swiss publication statistics. It would be a task for a bibliographically inclined doctoral candidate to hunt down all the Swiss appearing under German imprints within a single year! Keller and Meyer and Gotthelf and Zahn in the past, like Frisch and Dürrenmatt and Diggelmann and Walter in the present, were probably more concerned with a wide reading public and perhaps larger royalties than with "geistige Landesverteidigung" behind the custom's wall that, according to Martin Hürlimann of Atlantis Verlag, works to the detriment of Swiss publishing. At least it did when he gave his presidential address to the publishers. Thus Swiss literature is not a distinct entity, even if some men of character regard their country not merely as a domicile or an economic vantage point, but as their home, where they stay, which they defend, and which they therefore use also for publishing. Of these Kurt Guggenheim and Mary Lavater-Sloman are the foremost and most successful. Frau Lavater was born as daughter of a Hamburg shipping-line owner, but married a Swiss engineer, went with him to Petersburg and returned to Winterthur when the first world war broke out. She has been writing in Switzerland ever since and is, in Germany, the nearest that German literature has to offer to the French couple of biographers, M. and Madame Maurois, the foremost and most prolific biography author. Guggenheim, as we have seen, fights not only to safeguard the Schanzengraben and the botanische Garten in Zürich, he also depicted in 1965 his predecessor Gotfried Keller as a Zurichian reality in Das Ende von Seldwyla, as he had previously depicted the life of Fabre or his own life or the life of his native Zurich over the last half century.

IV

I have, imperceptibly I hope, slithered into the quicksands of individual authorship. Here then I shall have to struggle and see whether I can extricate myself later. Our friends in the professorial profession of literature, Senn in Philadelphia and Spycher in Oberlin and Boeschenstein in Toronto and some others the readers know better than this writer, have all at times tried to evaluate Swiss letters and to interpret it for those not so professionally engaged. The last such contribution was Boeschenstein's "Zur deutschschweizerischen Literatur der Gegenwart" in Deutsche Beiträge, vol. 5, 1965, published by Francke Verlag in Bern and Munich. (This aspect, the double domicile of publishing houses, has been passed over in the statistical part, by the way.) He mentions Inglin, Faesi, Moser, Kübler, Arnet, Humm, Cécile Lauber, Elisabeth Aman, and analyses Diggelmann, Guggenheim, Frisch, Karl Schmid and others in some detail.

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Also Werner Weber of the NZZ has brought forth a very rich collection of his essays, Tagebuch eines Lesers, 1965 with Walter in Oiten and Freiburg im Breisgau, and Professor Muschgl, who died during the last year - as did the essayist Rychner, Albert Schweitzer and T.S. Eliot - had just gathered a volume of essays accompanying his Tragische Literaturgeschichte. No doubt, many other such collections could be named, though I had rather point out the memoirs of Ginsberg, the actor, who wrote the book that impressed me most of all and that, according to Hans Rohr, was also a major success in Switzerland, where this German-born, Jewish actor and director had found refuge and work, has lived and died. He was stricken with paralysis and unable to speak and to write; the poems which then came into being seem to me the greatest poems that have been written since Nelly Sachs and Ludwig Strauss wrote of reality. Incidentally, I am bringing out a book on Was bleibt with Hans E. Günther in Stuttgart this year and say in it that I consider Erika Burkart the greatest living poet in the German language, because she too is not just playing tricks with verbal material, but tells of what she has experienced and therefore strikes us where the heart is sensitive. Mit den Augen der Kore was to me a document of life that had become great poetry, Tschudy St. Gallen 1962; but it was followed by ich lebe, Artemis 1964. I should think that others who have loved and suffered and won themselves back to living would be able to appreciate the greatness of this woman. She is, by the way, the daughter of Walter Burkart, whose Der Reihersjäger vom Gran Chaco, Schweizer Druck- und Verlagshaus, Zürich, 1962, is a classic and will long survive the author; for it tells of a life so rigorously and uncompromisingly courageous and unique that it will become eventually a document like the lives of Thomas and Felix Platter.

Werner Weber, whom I regard highly, thinks well of Im Sommer des Hasen by another Muschgl, Adolf, published by Arche in 1965 and a major success. I cannot get very excited over it. A young man obviously had a few real or imaginary experiences in Japan that would not fill a book and were not suited to autobiographic treatment either; but being eager to write and publish, he invented a project according to which a big firm would send some literary men to Japan and have them write of their experiences there. By making himself the organizer who met these shady replicas of his own original in Japan and then wrote up their reports for the firm that footed the bills, he can make much out of little. It is the time-worn technique of the frame within a frame, which Storm used for lack of better things to tell; such a frame game allows for any kind of ingredient and disruption; for it holds together what does not really hang together as a character or a real plot. After all, nothing happens here that matters to any of us; and no figure stands out. Even as solid and professorial an editor as Werner Weber is taken in by the clever mixing techniques of weak ingredients, but this is not a book that will stand up. Of the success books I would personally regard the John Gunteriad of Frith René Allemann, 25 mal die Schweiz, 1965, München bei Piper, the most enjoyable to read for both natives and non-natives of Switzerland. Those who know their Basel or Zürich or Jura or Wallis, or whatever they know and love, will find interesting that which a very
intelligent and superior observer and expert in writing has to say about it; those who do not know anything can learn a great deal. I would say that especially the children of Swiss-Americans would here get a most sophisticated and brilliant introduction. Incidentally, I would also suggest that their fathers simply subscribe regularly to Schweizer Heimatbücher and Berner Heimatbücher and set aside on a shelf to add the new volumes with their excellent texts and wonderful photographs. Nowhere else is such an inexpensive series of topnotch material available.

This brings me to a last topic, the Swissness of Swiss literature. Senn and I have always been much concerned with this, but Boeschenstein tends to think a little less of the regional and dialect writings than some of us others do. I must confess that I liked always the Odyssey in the Bern-German version that appeared in 1960 with Francke, done by Albert Meyer. (The Meyers to the front!). I also liked old Bodmer who concerned himself with what one would do with one’s daughters after the great Flood and therefore invented some charming episodes for the daughters of Noah, vastly improving on the original and making it more suitable to the reading of innocent daughters besides. I also liked his Milton and discovery of the Minnesingers and the Nibelungen; all of this was genuine, not literary literature; it was rich with fragrance and regional color. Would we read the Odyssey or the Nibelungen if they were written in the manner of the Bible or of Thomas Mann? Or of that Muschg in his Rabbit Summer? My point is that we like literature that has the quality of earthiness and genuineness and is written not as mere literature in an idiom that everybody can handle, but in a language that does not permit any faking. To write a poem like Rilke or a novel like Mann or Muschg is relatively easy and has therefore been done quite often, but it is impossible to write a good story in the genuine language of the Emmental or the Schwarzbuebe or Appenzeller or Stadtbasler unless he has some good story to tell in the first place. The native dialect does not allow for falseness, faking and literary tricks of obscurity or verbosity or changed orders within a frame. The glass "splitter" of the kaleidoscope remain simply glass and never become more by putting a Japanese frame around them! I have therefore read with considerably more enthusiasm the stories of Altherr and Fringe­ll and Freuler that appeared in the big anthol­ogy of Artemis, Bestand und Versuch, and ordered thereafter each of their books and pamphlets that Herr Rohr could get hold of. I have always loved Usteri and Corrodi far more than C.F. Meyer, for I always imagined that I could do a story like that Meyer myself, without trying too hard; but I could never write a Vicari or Herr Heiri, if I tried for a life-time! My imagination may play me a trick, but when Schaukal pointed out the horrible style of Meyer some fifty or more years ago, he was right. There is no such horror in Corrodi or Usteri, nor is there in Altherr or Fringe­ll or Freuler or any other genuine writer of dialect, including Jacob Burckhardt. I would therefore say that someone who has some interest in his native land should get together the dialect periodicals, most easily of course, Schwyzerlüt. Zyt­schrift für üses Schwyzerdütsch, where much information is always
forthcoming, and then collect such authors while they live and write and get them eventually to a major library. For electronics will inevitably destroy the regional character of the native tongues and replace all age-old dialects with a modernized interlingual jargon, derived from pretentious doctoral radio announcers of German and other origin. Traugott Vogel, Erwin Heimann and many others have also written in dialect, and not only in the language of written German. I should think every Swiss would get some pleasure out of a booklet like Heinrich Altherr's Oser Gattig Lüüt. Zeä Geschichten im Appenzeller Dialekt. Verlag Niggli und Willy Verkauf, Teufen 1954. These teachers and regional authors will outlive the famous literary figures that have their big sales now, for they are themselves like Homer or Vergil or Theocritus, writers that depict a reality they know, in the language of the people they know; and this is exactly what we like when we read Dickens or Balzac or Homer and Gotthelf themselves. Who then would be the Homer of this world of Switzerland today?

Not the immigrants Widmann and Ginsberg, though Widmann as editor of the Bund and travel writer and correspondent and Ginsberg as actor and poet did become natives in the end. Widmann's correspondence with Ricarda Huch appeared, by the way, also during the last year. Nor can we here go to the mad genius that must express itself regardless of the reader's capacity. The language of Wirz, for example, is often horrible, and so unnatural that it is not even German, but we do not hold this against Wirz, for we realize here something like a volcanic eruption that simply had to bring forth whatever wanted out and reach the surface. There has not been a greater or seemingly madder genius among the great surrealists and expressionists and prophets for centuries; we should not expect such a force of nature to be a well-groomed little artist sticking his verbal mosaics neatly together. But there is one author whom every Swiss ought long ago to have adopted for his own and enjoyed reading during quiet intervals, because he is all that which we have just held up as genuine and real. That is Arnold Kübler, the author of the Oeppl novels, whose frustrating struggle for a modest success is almost tragic because it duplicates again the hopeless struggle of Spitteler. When I sent to my old friend Hollander of Texas University Spitteler's Olympischer Frühling, I believe for his seventy-fifth birthday or some such occasion, he wrote me that he was enjoying Spitteler's incredible imagination and humor and depth anew everytime he read in the book (So do I.). But, he said, it is almost incomprehensible that one should go through life and read all sorts of literature and even teach it and never come across such a masterwork! If any other people had a Spitteler he would be known the world over as a giant! Well! He was right. Spitteler is dead, but Arnold Kübler is still alive. I think it is time that the Swiss at home and abroad realize what they have in him. It would not hurt if the Germans took to him and dropped one of the others they tend to adopt by couples instead. How can the shallow technicalities of Frisch become internationally successful? Simply because they are shallow and international and intellectually conceived, I would say. Arnold Kübler's Oeppler!
Narr, Artemis 1964, is no such construct; it may not have the appeal that semilitary and subliterary fiction holds for large numbers, it has not the snob appeal that an empty symbolistic homo faber fabrication has for people who want to discover how symbolic it is when an engineer has a love affair with his own daughter, not knowing that she is his daughter. I have known a good many prominent engineers, but I have never known one who was a Frisch; for he would also have to be a fish who spawns his offspring at random. I cannot see any particular depth in this kind of international obviousness. But I think you will discover more than obviousness, real poetry, when you read a book by Kübler.

I have now named a good many names. No doubt, you could add a few more. But you recall the quicksand simile. After all, there were 777 titles of Belles Lettres alone in one year. There is no way of selecting rationally from these many works the five or ten that we should perhaps love if we knew them. We are bound to miss some, for we cannot even read 777 books a year with any promise of sound judgment. Two novels a day cannot be absorbed when it took their author perhaps two years to write one. But I hope I have called your attention at least to some titles or names that may give you a little of what they have given me. We need not love everybody alike. Some books will be interesting, some will simply strike us as useless. But we all know that another time we find them enjoyable. Perhaps you want to have a try and annually make your own survey for our benefit?