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Teju Cole:

“I Have Experienced Great Freedom Precisely in Swiss Villages”

by Alexandra Kedves

A metal railing of a viewing terrace is plowing with hard strokes over the panorama picture of Helvetian mountain tops. On another, an orange protection-net covers a construction site. Slats of a shutter traverse the view on yet another photography. And over the postcard idyll of the lake of Brienz a foghorn pushes white and big.

Between 2014 and 2019, the American-Nigerian author, art critic, and photographer Teju Cole visited Switzerland on and off, and in 2014 he even lived for six months in Zurich as a writer-in-residence. Back home in Massachusetts where he teaches at Harvard University, he offers a pictorial essay with the title “Fernweh,” a yearning to see distant places: Switzerland cuttings—mostly optically framed Swiss moments—that mean much more than the country. For Teju Cole, Switzerland is an image of position from which artists may create in our restless times. And “Fernweh” does not mean escapism.

*Are the many fences, frames, and braces in your pictures,
a translation of the Swiss discourse in narrowness?*

I did not experience any narrowness in Switzerland! And I did not intend to offer a social critique by these frame cuts. I believe, however, that a concentrated view of European countries inevitably also mirrors subliminally the “Fortress Europe.” And further, that in the twenty-first century, one may not take any mountain tops before the lens without subcutaneously pointing to climate change.

*The fortress USA is also being expanded:
Just now Donald Trump imposed a further entry ban—for Nigerians.*

That is truly terrible—and unnecessarily brutal. The large country of Nigeria has had ties with the United States for many years. Some 400,000 are living there; some 60 percent have at least a bachelor's degree. There is no reason for this nonsense; it is merely a political gesture. For his base, Donald Trump is playing strong man against Blacks and Muslims. While in Nigeria only one-half of the inhabitants are Muslims, most of the others are Christian. It will become very difficult for all Nigerians to travel to the United States. Anyway, right now, we are living in a nightmare.

*At this moment, Democrats try to nominate a savior;
whom do you support?*

I don't want to give any name. But one thing seems to be clear: We are entering a disaster of historic dimensions. The USA needs to find a better way of dealing with humans and the environment. We need a serious commitment to repair the world that we have so seriously damaged—keyword immigration, ecology, healthcare. No single savior is being called for, also no competitive tournament spirit, Blue against Red, but a rethinking of society as a whole. In neighborhoods, in towns, in federal states: everywhere change is needed. At this moment, the USA is a very cruel land.

Do also artists have a responsibility?

Foremost regarding art: I view the task given me as “to clear the space”: to declutter, to free up the view so that tensions become apparent and ethical possibilities visible. Artists need to be in the world, may not be detached—but also not be utterly enmeshed in it. They are not to swing the cudgels of propaganda. But by works of art, we may feel the intensity of human life: in principle, art transcends ideological or national boundaries, even if one may not understand the detailed roots of an individual work.

Why have you created a memorial to Switzerland by "Fernweh"?

Did I do that? Switzerland is a place where one may deactivate the noise and may, so to speak, be looking from the outside. I never felt to be Swiss, and a permanent stay would not be in question. But in Switzerland I could experience a happy being-far-away. The term "Fernweh" refers to that luck and to the painful yearning for it. Especially in the villages and sparsely peopled landscapes of Switzerland, I have experienced great freedom—and there are, nevertheless, traces of human involvement, of the curating of that landscape: fences, railroad tracks, curtains, old milk cartons. . . . It is not Swiss culture for itself that interests me. I am fascinated by how a nearly post-apocalyptic world of human traces might be featured. And my book is like a conversation with the classic tourist photo subjects of Switzerland; much looks like it is dead, but beneath it, life is vibrating. That is the intangible beauty of the land—in which also poverty is hidden and racism is no way a foreign word.

You have experienced racism in Switzerland less crudely than James Baldwin in his times. You are, nevertheless, more pessimistic than he.

Strolling through Leukerbad, I am not stared at like a wild animal as was Baldwin in the 1950s. And if I order a good wine in a nice restaurant of Zurich, I am served just as courteously as is a white person. The wallet counts. But racism—the fear of the other—is an omnipresent structural matter. A humane answer is missing to that which drives people to the sea. There is so much money from Africa deposited in Swiss banks: The money is welcome, Africans are not.

One is unhesitatingly involved in the arms trade with powers of other continents—but, no, refugees are not to come. It is understood: "They are not us." Even Swiss on the left tell me: "After all, we do more than the Austrians." What kind of argument is that? It involves life or death. I often think of the Jewish refugee boats that were not allowed to land in the United States.

What should be done?

I do not have complete solutions. Rather, a principled approach: each community on this earth is part of a collective project to create a human world—and everywhere something might be borrowed. Women of Yoruba society, for instance, have greater strength and self-awareness than the average U.S.-American. The music and eating in Lagos make me happy, exactly the way as sitting on a mountain trip in the Grisons. After the Enlightenment of the West, it had persuaded itself of its superiority and believed it was destined to export itself without concern for losses. Colonialism was long endured. Art, however, is supranational, from my beloved Brahms to the Yoruba musicians that I value.

Art as a therapeutic agent for the world?

Not in the way of an injection, and “all is well.” The cave drawings of early people in today’s France are for me like the quintessence of what we are striving for still today. These artists had basically a clearer view of reality as we have. Precisely, because their works had been art for ritual use, they have a depth that our pictures are missing. Of course, we cannot return to it. But if books, photos, and musical pieces relate to others, intonate them in their subtext and thus create a dialogue on an equal footing—then a space opens for which I am longing.

* * *

Teju Cole was born in 1975 in the United States and grew up in Nigeria. He celebrated his success as a writer with the novel *Open City* (2011). He is an important voice in photography critique, and works as a photographer himself. His most recent volume of photography presents pictures of Switzerland taken over some five years. (ked)

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~ Translated by Leo Schelbert