

## ***German Literature: a Very Short Introduction, Nicholas Boyle***

(Oxford University Press, 2008)

Additional topic to be included in the German version:

### ***(iii) The Literature of German-speaking Switzerland***

Switzerland is different too, different in history, language, religion, and above all in political constitution. Switzerland has at times been a good deal more aristocratic and oligarchic than it is now, but since it emerged from Hapsburg rule it has never been a monarchy. Swiss republicanism has affected every aspect of the national culture. Despite the numerical dominance of German-speakers (around 60%), none of the four official languages has been in an imperial relation to the others and a tradition of politically inspired linguistic critique like that of Austria has not been necessary. Over the centuries, and through several civil wars, Catholic and Protestant cantons have learned to live together within a federal structure and the Calvinist-Zwinglian form of Protestantism, while it has sometimes inclined to theocracy, has always relied on elective procedures within the Church and, unlike German Lutheranism, has not had to accommodate itself to dependency on a secular ruler. Traditions of self-government, local responsibility, and civic sense have formed Swiss literature and given it a distinctively moral, didactic, and even utilitarian tone. To these the twentieth century has added the slightly more ambiguous tradition of political neutrality.

The Catholic German-speaking cantons were largely untouched by the currents of deism and secularization that came up the Rhine from Holland and England to

Switzerland before they spread to Germany. Switzerland's eighteenth-century literary revival was, like the German, a Protestant affair. But while in Germany the existential dilemmas posed by loss of faith for the clerical branch of officialdom gradually brought into being a literature focused on the idea of artistic autonomy, Swiss secular literature was from the start marked by a critique of absolutist thinking and an emphasis on literature's civic function. Bodmer and Breitinger's resistance to Gottsched's Leibnizian theories of literary order was paralleled in the poetry of the scientific polymath Albrecht von Haller (1708-1777) whose fine philosophical verse (e.g. *On the Origin of Evil* [*Über den Ursprung des Übels*], 1734) shows a troubled scepticism not, as is often said, about the compatibility of science and religion (Haller remained a devout Christian), but about the applicability of Leibnizian philosophy to the realities of human experience. Johann Kaspar Lavater (1741-1801), Zurich's most prominent churchman, deliberately set out in a spirit of all-embracing tolerance to reclaim the intellectual and literary developments in Germany for the Christian faith (part of the rationale for his *Physiognomical Fragments* [*Physiognomische Fragmente*], 1775-1778) and built up an evangelical and spiritualist network which rivalled that of Goethe and provoked his hostility. Lavater's Zurich colleague, Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi (1746-1827), wrote, in *Lienhard and Gertrud* (1781-1783) a 'novel of education' very different from Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister*, or anything modelled on it: a demonstration of the author's new educational principles and of their ability to reform an impoverished and oppressed society.

The didactic strain, and a conscious distance from Germany, were maintained in nineteenth-century Swiss literature, which produced several outstanding writers of

narrative prose. Jeremias Gotthelf (the pseudonym of Albert Bitzius, 1794-1854), who had a pastor's practical knowledge of the needs of his congregation, saw in the realistic presentation of farming life, from the management of dung-heaps to the moral dangers of the labourers' communal sleeping-quarters, (e.g. *Uli the Labourer* [*Uli der Knecht*], 1841) a counter to Germany's (as he thought) amoral literature and irreligious philosophy, to which he makes polemical allusion in *Money and Mind* (*Geld und Geist*, 1834). His short story *The Black Spider* (*Die schwarze Spinne*, 1842) uses a touch of Romantic supernaturalism to teach a grim lesson in collective responsibility and individual self-sacrifice for the general good. After Gotthelf's death, his Switzerland of peasants, pastors, and patricians was transformed and its literature flowered. Gottfried Keller (1819-1890), urban, atheist, and politically liberal, was the supreme representative of the bourgeois and materialist culture of the later nineteenth century, when the Swiss economy was benefitting both from industrialization and from the rise of a banking sector of European importance. One of the great humorists in the German language he is remembered for his novels, especially *Green Henry* (*Der grüne Heinrich*, 1854-5 and 1879-80) and his short stories, especially *The People of Seldwyla* (*Die Leute von Seldwyla*, 1856, 1874). Keller's sense of difference from Germany was political in origin: he felt relatively close to the Northern traditions in philosophy – he was a follower of Feuerbach – and, to some extent, in literature – he found the example of Goethe nearly as overpowering as did Stifter. *Green Henry* is almost a novel of anti-education: it tells the life story of Heinrich Lee as a sequence of squalid little acts of selfishness and treachery. The height of his self-deception is to train as an artist in Germany, a career for which he has little talent. For a moment it seems as if the novel is going to culminate in a pastiche of *Wilhelm Meister*, with Heinrich being adopted by a nobleman, but realism

wins out and he returns to Switzerland to expiate his follies by a life of service in the administration of his local community. The climactic set-piece of the novel is the overblown and tasteless artists' pageant in a German city (evidently Munich) which reveals the hollowness of German classicism, Romanticism, and pseudo-medievalism and their roots in political subservience. It contrasts with the earlier carnival pageant in Heinrich's home village: a genuine festival of the people, celebrating William Tell, the image of freedom and self-sufficiency. In *The People of Seldwyla* Keller casts a good-humoured but at times sharply critical eye over Switzerland itself. The story *A Village Romeo and Juliet* (*Romeo und Julia auf dem Dorfe*) – which inspired Delius' opera – shows his ability to represent symbolically in rural stories the great changes taking place in economic life: the growth of competition, the impoverishment of the country, and the move to the towns. These themes are much more pronounced in the second collection of 1874.

Keller's political suspicion of Germany was shared by the great Basle historian Jacob Burckhardt (1818-1897), the author of *The Civilisation of the Renaissance in Italy* (*Die Cultur der Renaissance in Italien*, 1860), whose *Reflections on World History* (*Weltgeschichtliche Betrachtungen*), delivered as lectures between 1868 and 1872, were directed against the grand philosophies of history that were currently being used to explain and justify the foundation of the Second Empire. Burckhardt had sympathy, however, with Schopenhauer's anti-historical pessimism and no doubt passed some of it on to Nietzsche, who was in his audience, though not unfortunately the Swiss liberalism which led him to decline the offer of a professorial chair in Berlin. The novelist and short-story writer Conrad Ferdinand Meyer (1825-1898) was

also deeply impressed by Schopenhauer, whose moral theory of compassion is central to his last and greatest story *Angela Borgia* (1891). But Meyer, a man of means from one of Zurich's ruling families, was more easily seduced than Keller or Burckhardt by the spectacle of German power in 1871. Long uncertain whether to write in French or German, he decided on German after Bismarck's dazzling successes. In his stories, most of which take place in the Renaissance and Reformation periods, Protestant heroes regularly show the qualities which the ideology of the new Empire associated with Germany. Meyer also, however, has a taste for lavish, colourful, settings with undertones of cruelty and violence, which may reflect his own mental instability, and which link him to the contemporary aestheticist movement in Germany and elsewhere. He and Burckhardt contributed to an image of the Renaissance as amoral and sensuous which recurs in the work of Nietzsche and of the young Hofmannsthal, though Hofmannsthal subsequently discarded it. Meyer's poetry is arguably more interesting than his prose: its symbolist, even Imagist, qualities can be seen as an anticipation of Rilke.

In the twentieth century Switzerland has been almost as important for the haven it has offered to disaffected German writers, such as Hesse and Thomas Mann, as for its own literary production. Robert Walser (1878-1956), an almost wholly isolated figure, who spent much of his life in a mental hospital, became, after some early novels, a prolific and highly personal miniaturist in prose and poetry whose depiction of the life of the office-clerk and downtrodden employee anticipated Kafka, and whose gentle meditative manner, with its sudden glimpses into the depths, anticipated Sebald – both of whom greatly admired him. Carl Gustav Jung (1875-1961), the founder of 'analytical psychology', was possibly the most influential Swiss writer of his time, contributing significantly to the terminology of psychoanalysis during his

collaboration with Freud and, with such concepts as ‘archetypes’ and ‘collective unconscious’, giving inspiration to writers, artists, and literary critics. Like Freud, Jung made extensive use of Goethe in his psychological work, and the bitterness of their falling-out may have been partly due to a rivalry between them in claiming this German figure of authority for themselves. (Jung thought he might be descended from Goethe through an illegitimate child – of whose existence, it should be added, there is no evidence.)

Two figures dominated Swiss literature in the period after the Second World War, both of whom were extremely successful in the Federal Republic of Germany and acquired worldwide reputations, particularly for their plays. Both of them, as dramatists, owe an evident debt to Brecht – whose work was put on in Zurich throughout the 1940s – and also to the French theatre of the absurd, yet both in their way continue the Swiss moralistic tradition. Max Frisch (1911-1991), who for a while lived with Bachmann in Rome, made his international name with plays with a clear, but indeterminate, relation to the Nazi tyranny: *The Fire-Raisers* (*Biedermann und die Brandstifter*, 1958) draws a lesson (but what lesson?) from the failure of the German electorate to credit the literal meaning of Hitler’s promises of violence and massacre. It might be thought that it was not for a Swiss writer, whose country had a doubtful record in the war against Nazism, to upbraid Germany in this way, but *Andorra* (1961) dramatizes a slide into anti-Semitism in a small mountainous country that could be taken as a warning both to Switzerland and to the world. Frisch’s novels, however, which concentrate on themes of personal identity, are less securely situated in a significant political context, though *Homo Faber* (1957) successfully

relates the fracturing of identity both to the globalization of international travel which makes it possible and to the technocrat's thinking which conceals it from the individuals affected. Friedrich Dürrenmatt (1921-1990) incorporated an element of grotesque comedy, with a strain of Kafkaesque nightmare, into his plays and stories. Much of his work is couched in the forms of detective and crime writing, and this made it if anything more popular than that of Frisch. *The Visit (Der Besuch der alten Dame*, 1956), like *Andorra*, tests the willingness of small-town philistines to kill for their own material benefit and reveals the savagery beneath the surface of triviality. *The Physicists (Die Physiker*, 1962) was a Cold War fantasy suggesting the madness not only of the scientists responsible for developing nuclear weapons but of the society which claimed to be able to keep them under rational control. In all these dramas the Brechtian technique of distancing the audience from the action, and the ironical or comic mood, produce an effect oddly similar to that of Switzerland's own neutrality in relation to the major international conflicts of the twentieth century. Tragedy is acknowledged, but the intelligence of the audience is left to float free not only of emotional involvement, but of responsibility. This may partly account for the popularity of these works in Germany in the immediate post-war decades. But it also corresponds to an important truth about the situation of the global audience to which these works have appealed: we are aware of planetary issues that concern us all but are unable to link them to our local circumstances. The work of Frisch and Dürrenmatt may reflect an uncertainty in Swiss culture about the sustainability of national traditions of isolation and self-sufficiency in a world of ever greater mutual dependence. But, conversely, the world that is not Swiss may still have something to learn from Switzerland's centuries of experience of living in confederation while

maintaining a spirit of local identity and civic engagement. In Dürrenmatt's words:

'The world will either have to end, or to turn into Switzerland'.