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## Swiss Literary Culture since 1945: Productive Antagonisms and Conflicting Identities

### I

In his recently published second novel *Der Mann ohne Licht*<sup>1</sup> the young Swiss author with the English-sounding name, Martin R. Dean, confronts the reader with an aging, once-famous Swiss writer named Loder, who lives in a remote village in the Jura mountains and who has not written a single word for the last ten years. Loder is secretly being investigated and kept under surveillance by the local police officer, Lachat; this Lachat suspects him of a drug offense in connection with a Tamil refugee whom the writer had kept in hiding for a week. Prior to this incident, the police officer had been Loder's only interlocutor and friend during his self-inflicted *Inner Emigration*. When the journalist Mario Dill visits Loder and tries to unravel the secret of the writer's ten years of silence, he is subjected to an outpouring of Loder's pent-up wrath and contempt for his native country, Switzerland. According to Loder, Switzerland is a phantom without real existence. It is the chimera of a fanatical military, the invention of a card-players' club and of the rifle association. The country's allegedly famous achievements, for which it claims patents and licenses ever since its founding in 1291 — such as being the oldest democracy, having the best social welfare system, the best working morale, the second highest gross national product, the best of all armies — all these accomplishments are one big patent fraud. The old writer asserts that Switzerland is a myth, made up of self-congratulatory superlatives. The Swiss are the conspiracy of a silent majority who conceals everything from everyone, sweeping its dirt

under the rug. Because the country has no regard for history, it stubbornly refuses to participate in history. Its cancerous xenophobia is only the other side of an age-old self-hatred.

This long diatribe against Switzerland is hyperbolic to the point of sounding like a travesty. And a caricature it most certainly is. When the old writer says that he does not believe in progress — not in linear progress, at any rate — we hear in the background Friedrich Dürrenmatt, who repeatedly ridiculed the optimistic Western creed of progress. And when the fictitious author announces his loss of faith in the Enlightenment, we are reminded of Max Frisch's speech in Solothurn upon the occasion of his 75th birthday, in which he pondered the question of where to look for hope after enlightened reason has failed. In fact, all this invective sounds like a compendium of the charges brought against Switzerland by its writers in the last forty years, a period that reverberated with their criticism of Swiss society and its government, a time when, as Hugo Loetscher recently put it, "many writers indulged in a kind of negative jodeling."<sup>2</sup>

Only one argument in Loder's condemnation of Switzerland is new — a strange compound borrowed from semiotics and systems theory — namely, that in comparison with other countries Switzerland has proliferated into a rampant system of unfathomable complexity. Because it is a small country lacking in space, things cannot explode; therefore, they implode and produce horrible air pockets all over. The prevailing obscurity is the result of an excessively dense codification. In such a country everything is codified in multiple

ways: the army, the law, politics, etc.; these ambiguities are easy to live with, however, for anything goes provided that nothing is ever changed.

The old writer's rantings have a slightly crazy ring, and at times his behavior is also rather bizarre. Even though one is tempted to read his story as fiction about the literary old-guard—Dürrenmatt and Frisch, in particular—it is not a *roman à clef* in the strict sense. With its harmless rural setting and the dialogues between the intellectual Loder and his friend, the state investigator Lachat, the novel is reminiscent of Dürrenmatt's early mystery stories and seems to be a fictional representation of its literary precursors. In this respect, Dean's new book bears some resemblance to Philip Roth's *The Ghost Writer* (1979), the first of the "Zuckerman Trilogy," with Zuckerman's aging spiritual father, E. I. Lonoff, living in semi-reclusion in rural Massachusetts. Insofar as the literary technique of fictionalizing the precursors can be interpreted—in terms of Harold Bloom's *The Anxiety of Influence*<sup>3</sup>—as being the most effective way of symbolically killing one's own spiritual fathers, we might ask ourselves if this newest novel by Dean is not a first-class literary burial, an epitaph not only for Frisch and Dürrenmatt, but for the entire literary period that began after the war. We are tempted to ask further whether Dean's novel is not, at the same time, an implicit renunciation of the writer's role, predominant in German-Swiss literature for the last forty years, in that it transforms the image of the writer as a critical analyst of society from an idea and a serious obligation by which to live into a satirical topic and a fictional motif. Possibly Dean's new book is the metafiction that announces the beginning of postmodernism in Swiss literature; as such, it may signal the end of an era.

## II

The beginning of this era seems deceptively easy to ascertain. It is usually considered to be the end of World War II. Yet, we have to ask ourselves whether 1945 can be properly

credited with starting a new literary period in Switzerland, be it in the German- or French- or Italian-speaking regions. As a neutral state, Switzerland was not actively involved in World War II; it did not undergo the turmoils of the Third Reich and, although Swiss society did not remain totally untouched by fascist tendencies, the country did not have to rebuild a new political system after the cultural and moral collapse of the old one. As one of the few countries in Europe left completely intact during the surrounding destruction, Switzerland was indeed a "Sonderfall," a special case, due to either luck, a miracle, good or doubtful diplomacy, or all these factors together. Therefore, we must ask whether the social, political, and cultural situation of Switzerland in 1945, fundamentally different from Germany, does not compel us to separate German-Swiss literature from German literature of that time, labeled *Kahlschlag-Literatur*, or "Literature of the Year Zero."

Before answering this question, let us try to find a more general framework for the interrelations between German and German-Swiss literature. A glance at a few recent literary histories of postwar German literature reveals an interesting picture: in the voluminous *Kindlers Literaturgeschichte der Gegenwart*,<sup>4</sup> the literatures of the Federal Republic of Germany, the German Democratic Republic, Austria, and Switzerland are treated individually in separate volumes, with approximately equal space devoted to each. On the other hand, *Hansers Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur vom 16. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*<sup>5</sup> deals with approximately the same period in two volumes, one being *Die Literatur der DDR*,<sup>6</sup> the other entitled *Literatur in der Bundesrepublik Deutschland bis 1967*.<sup>7</sup> In the volume on the literature of the Federal Republic of Germany we can spot, just before the Annexes and Indexes, a very short fifth part on special aspects of Swiss and Austrian literatures, 20 pages each, barely 3% of the total. Among other reasons given for this marginal treatment of Swiss and Austrian literatures, we are told that "many writers who by their nationality are Swiss or Austrian, must be

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regarded to a certain extent as being writers of the Federal Republic."<sup>8</sup> The third of these recent histories, *Geschichte der deutschen Literatur vom 18. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart*<sup>9</sup> divides German postwar literature into three parts: the first is the "Literature of the Federal Republic of Germany and of German-speaking Switzerland" (my emphasis) without any further distinction; the second is devoted to the "Literature of the German Democratic Republic," the third to the "Present Literature of Austria." The last example is the *Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur von 1918 bis zur Gegenwart*<sup>10</sup> by the reputed Fischer Verlag. It has two long chapters on the literatures of the two German states, but one looks in vain for a single word about Swiss or Austrian literature. In the preface the editors argue that by reason of their theoretical socio-historic orientation, they did not isolate the Swiss and Austrian authors from the West Germans, since their works are marketed and distributed on a *supranational* literary market (which they call *the Federal Republic of Germany!*). Evidently several forms and degrees of literary and cultural annexation are taking place in harmless scholarly books such as literary histories. Of the possible combinations within the four German literatures of the present, the only variation not to be found is "The Literature of the German Democratic Republic including Switzerland." Without delving further into the difficult problem of writing histories of the German literatures, we can learn from these examples that apparently the position of German-Swiss literature within the context of German literature in general and its interrelations with the literatures of the other German-speaking countries is anything but clear. It might therefore be useful to outline the cultural dynamics and the structural forces that determine German-Swiss literature and its institutions and set them apart from German literature at large. In contrast to the literary historians mentioned above, this shall be done from *within* the Swiss cultural system—which substantially changes the perspective and outlook. Since these forces determine not only the production but the dis-

semination and reception of literature as well, we might find in them the common denominator of what any Swiss writer is subjected to and what therefore gives German-Swiss literature its unique shape.

### III

The cultural dynamics of German-Swiss literature may be conceived in terms of the following four basic forces:

- 1) The multilingualism of Switzerland;
- 2) The bilingualism of the German-Swiss region;
- 3) The internally disparate cultural tendencies caused by federalism and regionalism; and
- 4) The external integration into a supranational language-culture leading to a very close yet strongly selective affiliation with one or more neighboring national states and their cultural life.

Our explanatory model of the specifics of German-Swiss literature is built on three axes: language, cultural identity, and political organization. It is the hypothesis of my theoretical framework that the peculiarities of German-Swiss literature rest on a highly differentiated interplay between these four basic forces. Therefore, if we want to establish criteria that uniquely characterize German-Swiss literature—going beyond the contingencies of the writing individuals in this country without resorting to simple national stereotypes—we must examine more closely these forces and their interplay.

Perhaps the most important effect they exert on individuals—be they writers or not—is the creation of an intricate network of cultural antagonisms and conflicting identities involving divided cultural loyalties or, psychologically speaking, cultural double-bind situations, with floating boundaries between *ownness* and *otherness*, *inclusion* and *exclusion*, the *familiar* and the *strange*. Due to these antagonistic forces we can observe in Swiss literature a broad range of colors and shades oscillating between darkly withdrawn isolationist Alpine provincialism and brightly

sparkling cosmopolitan openness and artistic brilliance. Only recently Adolf Muschg, who belongs to the uttermost end of the highly reflective artistic side of the spectrum, formulated this double-bind situation by addressing the question of a National Swiss literature as opposed to German literature in a shrewdly refined way:

There is no Swiss National Literature, but we are tempted—should our neighbors too eagerly claim us for their own cultural inventory—to defend our territory by considering our national boundaries binding in literary respects as well. We need the bond of a Swiss literature as we needed a political bond to unite us politically against those same neighbors. At bottom it is the Swiss citizen within the Swiss author who refuses in the realm of politics the very annexation (the "Anschluss") he depends upon in the realm of culture and language. A Swiss National Literature? There is none and neither may it be allowed, German-speaking Switzerland does not want to go the way of the Netherlands into a separate language-culture. Swiss writers need in their own eyes, and in those of their neighbors, the concession of a separate identity. In order to be able to doubt this very identity we need to be treated by our German friends as if it existed.<sup>11</sup>

Before we explore in more detail the specific double-bind situation of the Swiss writer vis-à-vis Germany, German language, and German culture, we should briefly consider the impact of Swiss multilingualism, i.e., the fact that Switzerland has four national languages: German, French, Italian, and Romansh. The multilingualism of Switzerland is—on a more elevated level of culture—analogue to its cheese, yodeling, and chocolate on a folkloristic level: it is so famous as a Swiss specialty that it has become a myth. And it shares the embarrassing fact that it is not indigenous with other national myths like the one about the famous cross-bow archer William Tell. The principle of multilingualism, as laid down in Paragraph 116 of the Swiss Constitution, reflects a relatively recent development in Swiss history; it is not the codification of an old tradition. As the Canadian

socio-linguist Kenneth D. McRae points out, "linguistic diversity was hardly significant" in the early periods of the long national building process of the Swiss Confederation from its beginning in 1291 to the collapse of the Old Confederation under the impact of French revolutionary ideas and the invasion of the French army in 1798. Official multilingualism came into existence only when the French imposed upon the invaded country the "Helvetic Republic" based on a constitution created in Paris.<sup>12</sup>

Looking for the consequences of this factual and official multilingualism in literature and literary life, we must admit that in literature a blending of the four languages into a kind of literary unity—the comparatist's dream and delight—does not exist. Occasionally isolated attempts have been made at conceiving a sort of "interlingual" Swiss national literature. Typically enough, this occurred mostly in times of political crisis and danger. Before and during World War II, in the days of the so-called "Geistige Landesverteidigung" (Spiritual Defense of the Nation) and in its aftermath, it was the comparatist Fritz Ernst in particular who developed the idea of a "Helvetic Culture" transcending racial, political, regional, and linguistic boundaries. The essence of such a Helvetic Culture ought to have been found at the very point of intersection of the three major European civilizations. As such, it would have represented the idea of cultural unity and diversity, of a "Helvetia mediatrix," of Switzerland the mediator.<sup>13</sup>

In the light of such high-flying and idealistic—if not ideological—concepts, the impact of multilingualism on literature has been assessed more soberly. Since Guido Calgari's important book *Die vier Literaturen der Schweiz*<sup>14</sup> in which he explicitly renounces any unifying principle and pleads for diversity as the essential cultural basis of Switzerland—"any attempt to strive for a spiritual unity would humiliate it"—the concept of four different literatures has become probably the most accepted view. Among German-Swiss writers we find a prevailing ambivalence with regard to the practical meaning of multilingualism.

They feel a political as well as a cultural obligation to overcome the constraints of a language-determined mono-culture in literature, yet they do not strive very hard to do so. Moreover, some remorseful regrets arise that the opportunities offered by the Swiss political system are not put to good use by its cultural and literary forces. Max Frisch confirms this view by confessing:

The necessity of effective mutual exchange across the language borders cannot be questioned. To be frank, I myself set a bad example: although sympathetic towards our Suisse romande, I have hardly any acquaintances there, indeed fewer than I currently have in foreign countries, I even know very little about it, I content myself with general sympathy.<sup>15</sup>

He is joined by Friedrich Dürrenmatt who, in his essay *Zur Dramaturgie der Schweiz*, deplores the actual situation of cultural antagonism caused by language oppositions and the way it is handled:

These oppositions are not a problem in themselves—it is quite natural that they should arise; what matters is that nothing develops from them, that we don't exploit our good fortune in having such oppositions, that the German Swiss and the French and Italian Swiss are just not interested in each other. We need to work together, to make an effort in a non-federalistic way, to experiment, to make contacts and to communicate with the aim of uniting our cultures. . . . Culture as national capital is a fiction; culture is a living creative reality. This proposed union is something that cannot be achieved by turning away from it. Switzerland should be taken literally, its duty is to be what it claims to be.<sup>16</sup>

Thus, if multilingualism has very little impact on the respective literatures in practice, at least it produces a bad conscience. As such, it is definitely a cultural force because it imposes a deep-seated (guilt-)feeling of commitment to a greater cultural and literary openness and universality. The general dialectics of literature—simultaneously the voice of an individual, the expression of a national tongue, and the universal voice of mankind—are prob-

ably experienced within the Swiss plurilingual system in a more immediate, more compelling way than in any unilingual monolithic language culture.

One other aspect of multilingualism that can at times assume great importance for literature is the fact that a plurilingual state and society forces its members to set priorities with regard to political and cultural values and loyalties. This happened during World Wars I and II and especially during the years of German fascism. The working of this cultural force is best exemplified by the case of Carl Spitteler, who received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1919, the only one Switzerland has ever won. At the outbreak of World War I Switzerland was dangerously divided with regard to the sympathies of the different language regions toward the two warring nations, France and Germany. In the German-speaking part with Zurich as its center, in particular, strong Germanophile and anti-French tendencies threatened national unity just when it was most needed. The "hashed-brown potatoes ditch," as the border between French- and German-speaking Switzerland is jokingly called in peaceful times, was in danger of turning into an extension of the deadly trenches separating France and Germany. In this situation, the writer Carl Spitteler gave a widely noted speech, *Unser Schweizer Standpunkt*, at the "New Helvetic Society" in Zurich, admonishing his German-speaking compatriots to adopt a more critical attitude toward Germany. He called for a clear-cut differentiation between Germany as a spiritual friend, whose literature and culture ought to be shared as a common heritage, and Germany as the present warring nation that had run amok.<sup>17</sup> This uncompromising speech cost Spitteler his public in Germany, where he had had many more admirers and followers than in his native Switzerland. The basic belief in the primacy of political alliances and in national unity across language borders *within* the country over cultural and literary affiliations *outside* the national border, exemplified by Spitteler's standpoint, is thus one of the cornerstones of Swiss cultural life.

Another basic determinant of German-Swiss literature is the fact that the German language in Switzerland is used in two variants: a very distinct dialect variant and the standard variant, High German. The use of the Swiss-German dialect permeates all social classes and levels of education. In this respect, it differs from the most dialect use in other languages, notably in Germany and in Austria. However, the Swiss-German dialect is basically restricted to *oral* communication. Conversely, High German is the equivalent standard for *written* expression. The instances in which High German is used in oral communication are restricted to a few domains and situations of more official character, such as school, church, most legislative bodies. Even in these domains, where the oral use of High German is institutionalized and laid down in official rules, teachers and pupils alike immediately switch from High German to Swiss German as soon as the bell rings and classes recess.

As a result of this general situation the German Swiss grow up with some sort of bilingualism, even in their native tongue. The question of whether this situation is correctly called a bilingual language system has been repeatedly debated among linguists. Presently the term most commonly used for it is "medial diglossia," that is, a language system made up of two separate yet not altogether different language variants, with a more or less clear-cut functional delimitation between oral and written expression. Such questions of terminology are of lesser concern for our topic. In literary respects the emotional, cultural, and esthetic effects of German-Swiss bilingualism are much more important. Emotionally the German Swiss feel at home with their regional dialect. The dialect is the medium of the intimate, the personal face-to-face relationship, the medium into which they have grown naturally by imitating and adopting parental and peer group speech, whereas High German is associated with the formal language-learning situation in school, with its long, tedious process of language discipline and normative constraint. Furthermore, it is

the idiom of a neighboring nation toward which the Swiss have strongly ambivalent feelings—for historical and political reasons as well as because of national mentalities. This is why most German Swiss vehemently defend the notion that High German is a "foreign language" for them, although, linguistically speaking, this claim does not hold true.

When we look at the impact of this general language situation on German-Swiss writers and on the literature they produce, we find that bilingualism has significant effects, making the Swiss writers' work situation very different from that of their colleagues in Frankfurt, Berlin, or Leipzig. At the outset most writers, despite their genuinely exceptional language competence, insist on the foreign-language character of High German, and they emphasize—maybe even overestimate—the extraordinary position they occupy with regard to literature and its institutions.<sup>18</sup> The German-Swiss writer Hugo Loetscher, a devout traveler and true cosmopolite with an intimate knowledge of world literature—especially Spanish and Latin American literature—cautions against exaggerations in that respect:

Certain colleagues consider this dilemma to be unique to the Swiss writer. I myself cannot follow this view. Compared to authors in other cultures, especially those of the Third World, who are much more radically confronted with the problem of writing in a language that is not their spoken idiom, the pains of having to choose between a High German and a Swiss dialect word for "sidewalk" are comparatively modest. It is not only in language matters that our sufferings lose their uniqueness compared to others.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, the *objectifiable* difference between dialect and standard language is not as decisive for the creative writing process as is the writer's subjectively *imagined* difference. And it does not matter whether this imagined difference is right or wrong. As long as it is felt by the writer, it has a reality of its own and plays a role in the writing process.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, the way in which the Swiss writer uses High German more nearly reflects his/



tion toward which valent feelings — reasons as well as ideas. This is why they often defend the use of a “foreign language,” linguistically it holds true.

Out of this general context of Swiss writers and their production, we find certain effects, making the situation very different from the situation in France. The Swiss writer is most often exceptional in the foreigner's eyes, and they estimate — the Swiss writer occupies with restitutions.<sup>18</sup> The Swiss writer, a depolite with an literature — American literature in that re-

his dilemma. I myself compared to actually those much more problem of us not their having to man and a walk” are not only in feelings lose to others.<sup>19</sup>

difference between language is not as a process as is a real difference. This imagined as long as it is the product of its own creative process.<sup>20</sup> The Swiss writer reflects his/

her own idea about what ought to be a true literary and artful German language than it does any actually written or spoken High German. This situation has psychological as well as stylistic consequences for German-Swiss literary language. In the minds of German-Swiss writers, otherness or foreignness becomes a prime characteristic of High German, since their mental construction of a German literary language differs so substantially from their own everyday language. Foreignness is experienced as an unstructured profuse reality whose complexity ought to be reduced; as a matter of fact, the term “foreignness” per se is nothing more than a semantic device for banning the threatening aspects of the unknown and for capturing it in clearly defined terms. By attempting to reduce complexity one tends to cope with the foreign by means of typification and, at times, even ritualistic formalization.<sup>21</sup> At the same time this imagined literary High German of German-Swiss writers is nothing more than the projection of their own artistic and esthetic aspirations with regard to language and style. Psychologically such a constellation is often combined with fear. Consequently, many Swiss writers mention their feelings of fear when asked about their attitude toward High German.<sup>22</sup>

Insecurity, fear, hypercorrectness, and formalization as the dominant instinctual feelings and attitudes of the Swiss writer toward High German may be experienced *subjectively* as a disturbing element in the writing process. *Objectively*, however, they bear a positive value: when the writer works his/her way creatively into the openness of a rather unfamiliar medium and toils along at it, the element of the artistic and the aspect of the creative take on greater significance. Accordingly, Swiss writers point to High German as a language of art, i.e., as an artificial means of expression in opposition to the dialect as a normal medium of communication.<sup>23</sup> Since the “natural” situation of Swiss writers with regard to their working material, the High German language, is an “artificial” one, the creative process is unusually reflective to begin with. It is likely to be more conscious and self-conscious than it

is for many indigenous German writers. As a result, German-Swiss literature tends to be more highly stylized and controlled, at least in the eyes of German readers. Günter Grass is reported to have said once: “You Swiss writers, you stylize, you are horrible classicists.”<sup>24</sup> In an interview with a research team from the University of Basel he expressed a similar view: “It strikes me again and again, how timid the Swiss writer is in dealing with his dialect. At times, it sounds rather strange how everything is ‘translated’ into High German.”<sup>25</sup>

It seems to me that the debate on the characteristics of German-Swiss literature has not paid enough attention to this aspect. Traditionally, the accent is placed on its innate “Realism.” One could demonstrate, however, that a strong tendency toward esthetic formalism and stylistic classicism has existed throughout the history of German-Swiss literature. It may not be a pure coincidence that the German “Naturalism” of the 1880s and 90s, the movement succeeding “Poetic Realism,” could never gain a foothold in Switzerland in any noteworthy form. In fact, we could even argue that any naturalistic “Hyper-Realism” in Switzerland would inevitably fail because of the insurmountable language dilemma. For in the process of transforming Swiss reality into High German words, i.e., in the transformation of the real world into its poetic representation, this reality becomes de-naturalized and artificial. Max Frisch once pointed to this dilemma in the context of a projected movie *Zürich Transit*, taken from an episode in his novel *Mein Name sei Gantenbein*, where it would have sounded awkward if the local people in the local setting of Zurich had conversed in High German, whereas in the literary text it was most natural. Perhaps the best example of the typically Swiss combination of perfect poetic artistry and realism in setting and content is Gottfried Keller's famous novella *A Village Romeo and Juliet*. The same artistic quality can be found in contemporary German-Swiss literature, e.g., in the works of Hermann Burger, Adolf Muschg, E. Y. Meyer, and others.

One last element of the bilingual language situation and its literary impact should not be left undiscussed, for without it we would not grasp the phenomenon in its full dynamic complexity. We have defined the way in which the German-Swiss writer experiences the realm of High German by its unfamiliarity, distance, normative constraint, and emotional estrangement which, in turn, engender a rather consciously stylized, highly controlled, de-automatized artistic literary language. Paradoxically enough, the same is true for the Swiss dialect as far as it is used in literature at all. Due to the functional differentiation between written and oral communication, i.e., the fact that the Swiss-German dialect is very rarely used in writing, the use of it in literature—be it as individual words, idiomatic expressions, or syntactic structures—can have the same effect of esthetic estrangement and poetic de-automatization. In this respect, a rather peculiar effect of inversion occurs for a Swiss or a German reader of texts that have dialect elements woven into them: whereas the German reader delights in or resents the typical Swissness of that text signaled by its dialect morsels, the Swiss reader will find the same elements (whenever he identifies them as such) in their High German surroundings very strange and unfamiliarly familiar. That is to say, by its very use in a literary context even dialect can become an artistic means for creating highly poetic effects. Many German-Swiss writers thus use their dialect as an additional instrument for creating values, colorful effects, melodic or semantic nuances, even if their basic literary language is High German. The degree to which they fall back upon dialect elements and the way in which they stylistically interweave High German standard language and dialect elements could be used tentatively as a criterion for a loose historical categorization among German-Swiss writers, as well as for distinguishing their personal stylistic differences. Famous for his intense use of dialect was Jeremias Gotthelf. By contrast, Gottfried Keller, by occasionally attacking Jeremias Gotthelf directly, stressed the need for a standardized German literary

language free from provincialism and regionalism. A similar opposition could be established between Friedrich Dürrenmatt and Max Frisch in our time—the former writing in a more spontaneous, plain-spoken language without inhibitions and restraints in dialectal coloring, the latter using a very conscious, controlled style. Robert Walser used dialect elements most charmingly as a rhetorical figure of humility and self-irony, whereas for Niklaus Meienberg, the self-stylized François Villon of contemporary German-Swiss literature, dialect particles are a powerful satirical weapon to expose personal traits or to denounce characteristic attitudes and ideologies of the Swiss ruling class.

Summing up the basic forces of Swiss literary culture, its multilingualism and the bilingualism of its German-speaking part, we find that the resulting peculiar dynamics lead to a precarious situation of a cultural neither-nor, an unstable balance always threatened by an impending imbalance. While this situation is easily understandable in the realm of language, it extends beyond the province of linguistics to become a general characteristic of literary life in Switzerland and of the personal situation of Swiss writers. To the degree that they partake in German literary life and culture, they might feel withdrawn and uprooted—if not outright alienated—from their Swiss background; insofar as they remain attached to it and do not cut their umbilical cord with their home region, they might feel cut off from the mainstream of German literature and culture. This situation engenders a continuous need to search for and an obligation to find a balance between the forces of delimitation and those of integration with regard to one's own cultural background and to German culture and literature in general. Very recently Adolf Muschg used the term "schizophrenia" in this context, and he called it a simple cultural obligation of the Swiss to stick to this schizophrenia and to endure it.<sup>26</sup> Dramatically overstating the case, we can say that Swiss writers not only live in a cultural limbo but also face uncertainty regarding the direction in which they must look for heaven or hell: to their



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boring Germany, or to a supranational German  
language culture or, even further, to an inter-  
national culture of world literature.

#### IV

We can now assess much better the mean-  
ing of the "Year Zero" of 1945 from the per-  
spective of the German-Swiss writer. Contra-  
ry to the situation in Germany, 1945 marked  
less a totally new beginning after a cata-  
strophic breakdown than it did a shift in the  
cultural orientation. Expressed in the imagery  
of the limbo I just defined as the place the  
Swiss-German writer usually occupies be-  
tween different cultures, the years of German  
fascism and the war brought about a situation  
that offered most writers a relatively sharp  
and unmistakable picture of where and where  
not to look for the promised land. Despite all  
the criticism and grudges Swiss writers could  
hold against Switzerland—and there were  
many—those years of the so-called "*Geistige  
Landesverteidigung*" had also forced writers  
to take a clearly defined side and to establish  
themselves ideologically as well as culturally  
within the boundaries of their native country.  
This process extended well beyond the realm  
of cultural attitudes and political ideologies.  
The development of National Socialism and  
the war also entailed severe consequences  
for the basic structure of the publishing busi-  
ness and the economic aspects of the produc-  
tion of literature in Switzerland. Before the  
war no other industrial branch had been so  
closely entwined with the German market as  
the book trade. About 75% of the books sold  
in Switzerland were produced in Germany,  
and most members of the Swiss booksellers'  
and publishers' association had also been  
members of the German publishers' guild.  
The total "Nazification" of the book trade in  
Germany—rigorous state control, censor-  
ship, and an extremely aggressive trade policy  
after 1935, with a lowering of export prices  
for German books by 25%—forced the Swiss  
book trade to reorganize completely by trying  
to reduce its dependency on Germany and to

reorient itself toward the production and dis-  
tribution of the indigenous "Swiss Book."<sup>27</sup>  
Thus, if the epoch of the Third Reich meant  
for 'German-speaking Switzerland, among  
others, a time of literary and cultural isolation  
and constraint, those years also had an eman-  
cipatory effect on the country in that they  
strengthened the tendencies toward cultural  
decentralization and toward a specifically  
Swiss literary culture.<sup>28</sup> Seen within the  
framework of our basic socio-cultural model  
of German-Swiss literature, we can say that  
due to the vital necessity of the nation's fight  
for survival and integrity, the prewar and the  
war periods were a time during which the  
double-bind situation, with its traditional an-  
tagonisms, prevailed to a much lesser degree  
than at other times.

However, this situation changed quickly  
with the end of the Third Reich. The shift  
was already signaled, a few months before  
the end of the war, in the very first play of  
the young writer Max Frisch: *Nun singen sie  
wieder. Versuch eines Requiems*.<sup>29</sup> With Max  
Frisch's entrance on the stage, followed short-  
ly afterward by Friedrich Dürrenmatt, we wit-  
ness what is perhaps the most astonishing  
phenomenon in the history of German-Swiss  
literature: its rise, first to a leadership role  
in German literature in general, and later even  
to world prominence. Hugo Loetscher called  
this period of the first fifteen years after the  
war "a kind of Golden Age for Swiss litera-  
ture."<sup>30</sup> And the analogy was drawn that, while  
Germany had its famous "Wirtschaftswunder"  
—the economic miracle of the reconstruction  
period—Switzerland had the "Literaturwun-  
der"—the literary miracle.<sup>31</sup> For years it oc-  
cupied not only the German-speaking theater  
stage with the new productions of its two pro-  
lific dioscuric dramatists—such as *Der Be-  
such der alten Dame* and *Die Physiker* and  
*Biedermann und die Brandstifter* and *Andorra*  
—but Swiss literature also reached world  
fame with some of these plays, as well as with  
the novel *Stiller* by Max Frisch.

In those years the basic cultural antago-  
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German-Swiss literature came into full play again. And it is my contention that a good deal of the productive energy leading to the Golden Age of German-Swiss literature after 1945 could be interpreted in terms of such antagonisms coming to the forefront on different levels, be they cultural, political, or personal.

To be sure, Max Frisch had started his writing career ten years before the end of the war; however, his early works still reflect the "contractive" mood of the "Spiritual Defense of the Nation"-era. The play *Nun singen sie wieder* takes up *in nuce* the structural "in-limbo perspective" in its setting, themes, and motifs. It was one of the earliest plays written on the war, provoking heated discussions when it was produced on stage in Germany. The title refers to a group of hostages who were executed by two soldiers, apparently Germans. The hostages died while singing, and their songs continue to persecute one of the executioners, Karl, who finally deserts and hangs himself. The other soldier, Herbert—a cultivated esthete and former model pupil of Karl's father, a college teacher—continues to follow military orders and finally even executes his former teacher for treason. Herbert's attitudes and actions thus reflect the much-debated irreconcilable German antagonism between Weimar and Buchenwald, Goethe and the Nazi-Camps. This first group is matched with a group of Allied bomber pilots and with a group of their civilian victims. By adopting an idea from Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, Max Frisch lets the dead of the different groups meet in a no-man's land and has them comment on what happened. It is neither the plot nor the unfolding of the dramatic action that constitutes the importance of the play. Rather, it is the way in which the play is organized around an invisible focal point of an in-between position—a "wandering point of vision," as Wolfgang Iser has called the phenomenon in a different context. The war with its cruelty and the theme of guilt are displayed by way of a repeated shift in role-taking in which the perspective switches from the German soldiers to the Allied bomber pilots and

their civilian German victims, and finally from the living to the dead. Yet this is done without drawing borderlines that would clearly define the territory and the realm with which the spectator is confronted at a particular moment. It is probably symptomatic that a Swiss author set up a war play for the German-speaking community, constructed in this manner. And most likely, only a Swiss could deal with the question of the German war-guilt in this way right at the end of the war. With regard to the development of German postwar literature, it is not insignificant that Max Frisch integrates influences of the contemporary Anglo-saxon drama—notably Thornton Wilder and Beckett—into the German tradition and blends them together with elements of the Brechtian theatre of estrangement, thus taking up the role of a literary mediator.

However, of greater importance to my argument is, first, the implicit thematic configuration or the implicit authorial attitude of changing perspectives, respectively, of the simultaneity of differing, possibly even conflicting identities. Secondly, it is, paradoxically speaking, the "stand"-point of a "wandering point of vision" between different worlds, be they warring nations, aggressors and victims, or the living and the dead. This "wandering point of vision" forces the reader or spectator into a varied role-taking and a repeated shift in perspective. And thirdly, it is the underlying moral assumption of this arrangement of the play: that the fabrication of rigid images of others constitutes the basic guilt, herewith fixing their identity, that above all the guilt lies in ethnic prejudices and ideologies. Hence the importance of the second Commandment: "*Thou shalt not make to thyself any graven image . . .*"

These elements constitute crucial features of Max Frisch's imagery as it unfolds in subsequent works and in his attitudes as a writer. On the thematic level of his novels and plays, the question of the fundamental antagonism between the individual as an existential being and his/her social and cultural appearances and roles is explored in depth in his novels *Stiller* and *Gantenbein* and in his play *Bio-*

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*grafie*. The deadly consequences of "graven image"-making—national, cultural, ethnic, or otherwise—are displayed in *Andorra*, in which the boy Andri falls victim to anti-Semitic prejudices, although he is actually not Jewish. By contrast, in *Biedermann und die Brandstifter* the saturated bourgeois is victimized by his own rigid thinking that blinds him vis-à-vis the intrusion of evil.

On the personal level—that is, with regard to Max Frisch's position as a writer and a Swiss citizen—one can observe the steady process of a growing critical distance, of disillusionment and estrangement from his native city, Zurich, and from his country. This is expressed, among other ways, by his self-chosen partial exile, first to Rome, then to the Italian-speaking part of Switzerland, and for a while to New York. At the same time, however, he remained actively involved in Swiss politics and public life, signing petitions and protest notes, commenting on political questions and actual problems of the day, debating with the President of the Confederation on TV, giving a speech on the 1st of August, the Swiss National Day. In numerous articles and public appearances he has expressed his views and opinions about Switzerland which, on the surface, might appear to some compatriots to have become more and more critical, if not outright hostile, toward his home country. Yet, looking at this development from a broader perspective, we notice that it is rather the process of an increasingly pronounced differentiation among various aspects or emanations of the country, namely, Switzerland as "Heimat," as "Vaterland," as a state and as a society. To one emanation of it—Switzerland as "Heimat," for instance—he might feel deeply attached, while with another—say, Switzerland as apotheosis of capitalist bourgeois society—he might live in vehement opposition and in a quarrelsome entanglement. The extent to which Max Frisch's national, political, social, and cultural identities as a Swiss citizen and as a writer differ from one another may be exceptionally accentuated, but by no means is such differentiation unusual.

I have chosen Max Frisch for exposing the structural constellation of the "in-limbo perspective" where the cultural givens of German-speaking Switzerland and the personal attitudes of this writer, as well as literary themes and motifs in his works, meet and intermingle. Space limitations permit me to do this only in a very sketchy way. Undoubtedly an in-depth study on Max Frisch, combining textual and socio-cultural analysis under the aspects of productive antagonisms and conflicting identities, could be quite a rewarding undertaking. The same methodological procedure could prove to be helpful for structuring the development of German-Swiss literature throughout the last forty years or for interpreting other Swiss authors. Take, for instance, Friedrich Dürrenmatt. At first glance he seems to be more elusive in this respect, his works less determined by biographical and social circumstances, his attitudes those of a blissful aloofness from the dealings of the day. How could we ever track down elements of the cultural double-bind situation of the German-Swiss playwright in Dürrenmatt's tragicomedy *The Visit* or in the grotesquely absurd play *The Physicists*? Dürrenmatt himself delivered the key in an interview that he gave in 1982 to the French newspaper *LE MONDE*, in which he answered the question about his being a "Swiss writer" in the following way:

I am a real Swiss, no doubt about that. My mother-tongue is the Bernese dialect, High German is artificial to me. But there is no national literature. I live in [French-speaking] Neuchâtel because I want to be left in peace, but I am isolated, without any contact whatsoever with Swiss literature. I do not see that Swiss tradition has had any influence on me. This said, however, I must admit that my adolescent years did have their importance. I was in my twenties during the war. Switzerland was spared the catastrophe, without our knowing exactly whether the country was a prison or an industrial plant working for Hitler. I lived on an island, or on a raft carried by the waves. I observed from afar the Twilight of the Gods like a spectator. Undoubtedly, that is why I view history as a grandiose and grotesque farce.<sup>32</sup>

Dürrenmatt's perspective is not from the limbo *between* different cultures but rather from the Olympus *above* the world or from that of an uninvolved observer passing by the scene of earthly horrors. His authorial attitude is that of the gigantic laughter of the Olympian gods over the absurdities of the human race; it is hardly the didactic one of critical concern traditionally regarded as typical for Swiss authors, Max Frisch included. Yet, as Dürrenmatt himself points out, this perspective, too, results from the specific situation of the Swiss writer in the socio-historical and political context of German culture and history before, during, and after World War II. Whereas Frisch's mental map is laid out horizontally within a field of tension extending from the cultures of the New World to Athens and Greece, as in *Homo Faber*, or from the United States to Switzerland, as in *Stiller*, Dürrenmatt builds up the field of tension in a vertical structure, as in *The Visit*, where Claire Zachanassian invades the Swiss town of Gölten like an antique goddess of fate and revenge, descending from outer space to unmask the underlying inhumanity and greed of the seemingly perfect social order in a provincial small town. Here, too, we find the point of perception from without.

Inherent in these structures of imagination of Swiss writers is another contrast, namely, the opposition between the small, closed-in space and the vastly extended open space, of pettiness and openness. This opposition also has its innate ambivalence. During the war and immediately afterward, the well-ordered and intact insularity of the small neutral state Switzerland offered the impression of a harbor of peace in a surrounding world of blood and chaos. In the 50s this feeling was increasingly superseded by a growing uneasiness about these very same characteristics. One of the key words of that time, with regard to German-Swiss writers, became the *Unbehagen im Kleinstaat*, coined by the literary historian Karl Schmid after Sigmund Freud's essay on *Civilization and its Discontents*. Soon after, in *Diskurs in der Enge* (1970), Paul Nizon criticized the country for its lack of

subjects of real interest. Peter Bichsel, in *Des Schweizers Schweiz* (1969), stated that the Swiss adhered to exactly the same clichés about Switzerland as did the average Englishman or American; he asserted that Switzerland had lost all its visionary impetus, had become an immobile society, was governed by bankers and plutocrats, was no longer a harbor for refugees but instead for illegal money. This period of criticism extended well into the 60s and early 70s, at which time it merged increasingly with the international youth movement, incorporating its criticism of the U.S. and the Vietnam War and its revolt against imperialism, capitalism, and neo-colonialism, thus becoming merely a local variant of a world-wide movement. We can witness its final reflection and ultimate dissolution in the mirror-image of fiction in Dean's new novel *Der Mann ohne Licht*.

At this point we have to ask ourselves whether at present it is still reasonable to treat German-Swiss literature as a phenomenon possessing its own specificity and determined by cultural antagonisms and conflicting identities as I described them. Several elements indicate that the situation may have changed indeed:

1) German literature today consists of four distinct literatures: that of the two German states, of Austria, and of Switzerland. To some extent this situation has alleviated the former antagonisms. Swiss writers no longer have to compete against *one* "Big Brother" on unfamiliar linguistic grounds. Instead, there are *four* different voices, each with its own handicaps, weaknesses, and strengths.

2) The ubiquity and internationality of cultural movements today also bring about a certain shift in the orientation of Swiss writers. They still depend economically on the German book market, but in some ways the Federal Republic of Germany has lost its literary leadership role.

3) During the 1970s the dominant themes and topics shifted away from social and political criticism toward a "Neue Innerlichkeit," the subjectivity of a "New Inwardness." Biographical problems of individual development and



- man trans.: *Die vier Literaturen der Schweiz* (Olten: Walter, 1966) 13.
- <sup>15</sup> "Die Notwendigkeit eines effektiven Austausches über die Sprachgrenzen hinweg, und zwar auf Gegenseitigkeit, steht ausser Zweifel. Ich selber, offen gestanden, bin ein Beispiel dafür, wie es nicht sein sollte: Voll Sympathie für unsere Suisse romande habe ich kaum persönliche Beziehungen dort, weniger als mit Zeitgenossen fremder Länder, weiss wenig, begnüge mich eben mit Blanko-Sympathie." Quoted and translated by Manfred Gsteiger, "Individuality, Interrelations and Self-images in Swiss Literature," *Modern Swiss Literature. Unity and Diversity*, ed. John L. Flood (New York: St. Martin's, 1985) 13.
- <sup>16</sup> "Das Problem sind nicht die Gegensätze, die Gegensätze sind natürlich, schwer wiegt nur, dass nichts aus diesen Gegensätzen entsteht, dass man die Chance nicht ausnützt, diese Gegensätze zu haben, dass der Deutschschweizer und der Welschschweizer aneinander nicht interessiert sind. Wir brauchen gemeinsame Aufgaben, Versuche nicht föderalistischer Art, Experimente, Kontakte und Dialoge, die darauf zielen, unsere Kulturen zu summieren . . . Kultur als ein nationales Kapital ist eine Fiktion, Kultur ist nur das Lebendige, das Schöpferische, das Wirkliche. Das behauptete Zusammenleben ist eine Aufgabe, die nicht dadurch gelöst werden kann, dass man sich vor ihr drückt. . . . Die Schweiz ist beim Wort genommen. Ihre Aufgabe ist zu sein, was sie behauptet zu sein." Quoted and translated by Manfred Gsteiger 17.
- <sup>17</sup> "Bei aller herzlichen Freundschaft, die uns im Privatleben mit Tausenden von deutschen Untertanen verbindet, bei aller Solidarität, die wir mit dem deutschen Geistesleben pietätvoll spüren, bei aller Traulichkeit, die uns aus der gemeinsamen Sprache heimatlich annimmt, dürfen wir dem politischen Deutschland. . . gegenüber keine andere Stellung als gegenüber jedem andern Staate: die Stellung der neutralen Zurückhaltung in freundnachbarlicher Distanz diesseits der Grenze. . . . Allen solchen Zumutungen gegenüber appellieren wir von dem wildgewordenen Freund an den normalen: friedlich-freundlichen, den wir nach Kriegsschluss wieder zu finden hoffen . . ." Carl Spitteler, *Unser Schweizer Standpunkt. Vortrag, gehalten in der Neuen Helvetischen Gesellschaft, Gruppe Zürich, am 14. Dezember 1914* (Zürich: Rascher, 1915) 10, 13.
- <sup>18</sup> "Die Tatsache, dass er [der Schweizer Schriftsteller] überhaupt eine Fremdsprache schreibt . . ." (Adolf Muschg); "Da wir also schon in einer fremden Sprache schreiben . . ." (Hugo Loetscher) in *Der Schriftsteller und sein Verhältnis zur Sprache—dargestellt am Problem der Tempuswahl. Eine Dokumentation zur Sprache und Literatur der Gegenwart. Gespräche und Werkkanalysen einer Arbeitsgruppe des Deutschen Seminars der Universität Basel*, ed. Peter André Bloch (Bern und München: Francke, 1971) 120, 92.
- <sup>19</sup> "Es gibt Kollegen, die dieses Dilemma als einzigartig für einen Schweizer Schriftsteller betrachten. Diesen Ueberlegungen kann ich nicht folgen. Vergleicht man die Situation eines Schweizer Schriftstellers mit der von Autoren in anderen Kulturbereichen und vorab in der Dritten Welt, wird man sehr bald feststellen, dass diese in einem viel radikaleren Sinne mit dem Problem konfrontiert sein können, nicht in der Sprache zu schreiben, in der sie reden. Verglichen damit nimmt sich das Leiden an 'Bürgersteig und Trottoir' bescheiden aus, aber nicht nur auf der Sprachebene verlieren manche unserer Leiden im Vergleich zu den andern an Einzigartigkeit." Hugo Loetscher, "Ich bin zweisprachig innerhalb der eigenen Sprache," *Mundart und Hochsprache: Arbeitspapier des Seminars für Pädagogische Grundausbildung des Kantons Zürich* (Zürich: Typoscript, 1983).
- <sup>20</sup> The detailed linguistic analysis of Max Frisch's language done by Walter Schenker proves this point. See Walter Schenker, *Die Sprache Max Frischs in der Spannung zwischen Mundart und Schriftsprache*, Quellen und Forschungen zur Sprach- und Kulturgeschichte der germanischen Völker. Neue Folge 31 (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1969).
- <sup>21</sup> Karlheinz Ohle, *Das Ich und das Andere. Grundzüge einer Soziologie des Fremden*, Sozialwissenschaftliche Studien 15 (Stuttgart: Enke, 1978) 82 ff.
- <sup>22</sup> Peter André Bloch 47 ff., 96, 104; see note 18.
- <sup>23</sup> "Wir schreiben prinzipiell in einer Kunstsprache, und das bringt bestimmte Probleme mit sich." (Hugo Loetscher); "Ja, ich glaube, man kann sogar sagen, dass für den Schweizer Schriftsteller das Schreiben an sich ein bewusster Akt ist. . . . Das Schreiben an sich hebt sich vom täglichen Gespräch ab." (Friedrich Dürrenmatt); "Aus der schweizerischen Dialektsprache kommt ein Stilisierungszwang, den ein Hamburger Autor unter Umständen nicht hat, weil er, wenn er von Arbeitern spricht und diese sprechen lässt, auf einen Slang, etwa jenen der Hamburger Hafendarbeiter, zurückgreifen kann. Das können wir nicht. Das Problem stellt sich natürlich vor allem beim Schreiben von Dialogen. Unter der Feder entsteht dann sofort eine zu schöne Sprache." (Otto F. Walter) in Peter André Bloch 92 f., 48, 150 f.; see note 18.
- <sup>24</sup> ". . . Die Gefahr ist insofern vorhanden, als sicher alle Schweizer, die schreiben, zu voreiligen Stilisierungen neigen. Ein Vorwurf, den ich gern auf mir sitzen lasse, die voreilige Stilisierung. Günter Grass ist ein Kenner des helvetischen Problems, und er macht uns das zum Vorwurf: 'Ihr stilisiert, ihr seid fürchterliche Klassiker' und so weiter." (Peter Bichsel) in Peter André Bloch 34; see note 18.
- <sup>25</sup> ". . . Was mir immer wieder auffällt, ist, wie zaghaft der Schweizer mit seinem Dialekt umgeht. Es klingt doch manchmal recht merkwürdig, wie sehr alles ins Hochdeutsche übersetzt wird. Jemand, bei dem ich es am deutlichsten sehe, wie es von der Schreibe und vom Gesprochenen her zusammenfließt, ist zum Beispiel Bichsel. Ja, der könnte meines Erachtens auch einen Schritt weiter gehen, in dieser Beziehung." (Günter Grass) in Peter André Bloch, 169; see note 18.
- <sup>26</sup> Walter Höllerer, "Literaturstadt Zürich. Diskussion mit Adolf Muschg und Reto Häny," *Sprache im technischen Zeitalter* 102 (1987): 124.
- <sup>27</sup> Martin Dahinden, *Das Schweizerbuch im Zeitalter von Nationalsozialismus und Geistiger Landesverteidigung* (Bern: Lang, 1987).
- <sup>28</sup> Hugo Loetscher, "The Situation of the Swiss Writer after 1945," *Modern Swiss Literature* 28; see note 15.
- <sup>29</sup> Max Frisch, *Nun singen sie wieder. Versuch eines Requiems*, Gesammelte Werke in zeitlicher Folge. Jubiläumsausgabe in sieben Bänden. 1931-1986, ed. Hans Mayer and Walter Schmitz, vol. 2 (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1986) 79-137.
- <sup>30</sup> Hugo Loetscher 31.



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<sup>31</sup> Klara Obermüller, "Die Literatur der Gegenwart in der Schweiz," *Deutsche Gegenwartsliteratur: Ausgangspositionen und aktuelle Entwicklungen*, ed. Manfred Durzak (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1981) 623.

<sup>32</sup> Bertrand Poirot-Delpech, ed., *Entretiens avec LE MONDE. 2. Littératures* (Paris, 1984): "Je suis un vrai Suisse, pas de doute là-dessus! Ma langue natale est le bernois, l'allemand est pour moi artificiel. Mais il n'y a pas de littératures nationales. Je vis à Neuchâtel pour avoir ma tranquillité, mais je reste isolé, sans contact avec une quelconque littérature suisse. Je ne vois aucune tradition suisse qui aurait comptée pour moi. —

Cela dit, les années d'adolescence ont leur importance. J'ai eu vingt ans pendant la guerre. La Suisse restait en dehors des catastrophes, sans qu'on sache très bien si elle était une prison ou une usine travaillant pour Hitler. Je vivais sur une île, ou sur un radeau emporté au fil de l'eau. J'observais au loin le crépuscule des dieux, comme un spectateur. De là sans doute ma vision de l'histoire comme farce épouvantable et grotesque." Avec Jacques Le Rider, 12 septembre 1982: 66 f.

<sup>33</sup> Christoph Geiser, "Zum Oesterreicher werden. Ein Anfall," *Litfass. Zeitschrift für Literatur*, 11. Jahrgang, Heft 43 (1987): 4-11.