

Antwort aus der Stille

M.Frisch

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When you are young life is ahead of you. It stretches endlessly into the future. You are young, but you have nevertheless already lived long enough, in fact, you cannot imagine a longer time-span, hence you feel as if you have lived for ever, that life so far has been infinite, yet your years indicate that this is just a fraction of what you can expect ahead. An infinity many times over. Yet you know that you have only one life, and that it will terminate. You got just once chance, and you not better blow it. You have to make the most of your life, and this is a daunting task. This infinitude ahead of you, this unwritten future, weighs heavily on you. So heavily indeed, that many young people opt for terminating it prematurely, as they despair of the task, of ever 'finding themselves'.

The young man is thirty. This is a crucial event in the life of a young person. The twenties constitute the pinnacle of youth, the thirties is actually a second chance. All you can do in your twenties you can do in your thirties, and even better. The forties is another thing, not to mention the fifties and the sixties. What goes beyond is of no concern at all. He has decided that he does not want to become an ordinary 'Mensch'. 'Leben ist Sehnsucht' muses the protagonist, and speculates that what one loses is more valuable than what one seizes. An hence you need to have the courage to lose, even if it is your own life. He has set himself the task to climb an impossible mountain wall, an attempt that has been made many times, but always ending in dismal and catastrophic failure. (It is not hard to imagine that this refers to the north face of the Eiger, which inspired such pointless dreams and desperate acts of mock heroism at the time of the author writing the novella).

Up in the mountain pension he meets a young woman. A happy and good-looking Danish one. She is everything he is not. Happy, superficial, and definitely by temperament un-brooding. She is intrigued by this 'Sonderling' and she falls in love with him. A true focused love, that ideally would only last a night. A love just for the precious moment, with no compromise, no dilution by ordinary chores; just pure and unsullied, the 'der wahre Augenblick, der nicht verweilen kann'¹. She goes on *...frei von allem Vergangenen, das auf uns lastet, frei von aller Zukunft, die uns zgern lbt, ein Abend, der ganz und gar der Gegenwart gehrte... und wenn man sich kbte, so wBte man, daB es die ersten und die letzten Ksse sind... ein Glck, das voll Abschied ist und niemals verflacht werden kann, niemals verwischt durch Wiederholung....* Not surprisingly she joins him the next morning on his hike, and not surprisingly he suffers her presence. They spend a night in a hut, and then further on in a tent. When she wakes up early the next morning he is gone. Meanwhile his bride to be has arrived at the Pension further down. She has learned that the bridegroom has taken off with another woman. She is paralyzed with jealousy of course, sensing that the other woman might be older, she definitely must, more experienced, not

¹ Not a quote from the book.

a mere innocent and inexperienced girl like herself (she is only twenty-one). The Danish woman is in fact older and married to boot, but her husband is sick, and she is appalled by his sickness, she cannot love him.

Up in the mountain, the young man is lost. He does not reappear. The two women have joined at the hut, united in common grief and concern. All rivalry is as gone, they care for each other, in their common bereavement. A day goes by before a rescue team is sent out. They nurture themselves on false and desperate hopes. The rescuers only find his rucksack which has obviously fallen from a great height. Any hopes of finding him alive are gone. The rescue team gives up. And so one evening he appears. Alive. His right arm useless, and slung into his pocket, his hair smeared with blood, his eyes resting in black hollows, his smile disfigured, foam at his lips. But he is alive. He almost lost his life, but in so doing he came to terms with it. To live is wonderful, no matter what, even if physically impaired. Now he is ready to tackle it, humbly but gratefully. And the book ends. What happens to the women? Such mundane matters is best left to the imagination of the reader.

It is early Frisch, written when he was in his mid-twenties. Supposedly during a life crisis, having abandoned his literary ambitions and decided to follow a regular occupation, in this case that of an architect. It all reminds me of Hesse, the same kind of depiction of a youth in crisis, making the momentous decision of what to do with life, by rejecting a prior commitment and investment.

Frisch is a master of evocation, of painting a scene in few words making it come alive. He already does so well in this juvenile attempt. You are up there by the glaciers, you feel the cold, the beauty, and the constant humming of water rushing down the slopes. You bring your own equipment, spoons that clink against metal, tents that stretch and wobble, and make the light white inside. It is all very melodramatic of course, but that is the privilege of youth, yet constrained. And the love story is convincing, because presented with such economy and with sufficient counter-intuitiveness to strike a chord.

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