

Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän

M.Frisch

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How is it like to live in a remote Alpine valley in Switzerland? To be trapped by rain and thunder, with the electricity going on and off? Max Frisch knows, and he makes sure the reader knows at all. At first he is present in the book, or so I think, until I realise, almost with a jolt, that his presence is not physical, only spiritual as the narrator, and that the only person present is that of the elderly Herr Geiser, living alone in his house, almost a hermit, reduced to his own wits.

Frisch makes out of the book a literal collage. Into the text is inserted cut outs from various books, mostly lexicons. Also in other ways his text is that of the collage, consisting of small pieces of thoughts and reflections pasted together. Sometimes the paragraphs are long and almost narrative in their structure and ambition, but often they consist of only a few words, such as 'Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän' or 'Ein Weg ist ein Weg auch in der Nacht'. The technique is that of the painter, dabbing pieces of color here and there, whose accumulative presence evokes an image. The image of an elderly lonely man at the end of his wits. The cut-outs literally exist, not only on the pages of the book, but on the walls of the house, where they have been glued when thumbtacks no longer could do the proper job. Before the Herr Geiser had simply copied the information out of the books, in a slow neat handwriting of block letters, in order to achieve correctness and legibility. Then he had realised that the life of man is too short for this to be done systematically, then he had started to cut things out instead, so much quicker, so much more accurate, never mind that the books of his tiny library are being torn to shreds, and that he is running out of wall space. So what do those cut-outs contain? Mostly isolated facts out of Natural History. Man is a product of Natural History, and trapped in a tiny fold in its unfolding time. This makes the little man think of not only himself but mankind as a whole as little. There is some comfort in that. But knowledge scrapwise and isolated is no knowledge, facts maybe, but often meaningless facts. Herr Geister collects them in a touching effort to know. Without structure, without systematic questions, the pursuit of knowledge becomes a pathetic collection, a mere collage of isolated, uninterrelated facts, a burder to the mind, running out of wall-space. But Herr Geiser is sinking into confusion, although he is only seventy-four.

He has a hard time remembering, and his excursion to a peak in thick fog, taxes his strength and wits to the outmost. He manages, but at a price, returning exhausted after midnight, struggling with heart-pains and muscle fatigues, cold and beyond hunger, his life-line being his torch, guiding his precarious return. Will ever anyone learn about his excursion? He himself has forgotten about it as he wakes up a day or so later, being puzzled by the traces of some disaster that seems to have struck him.

What does he remember? The conquest with his brother of Matterhorn fifty years back into the past. They did it fine getting up, but going down they goofed up finding themselves in a cul de sac, out of which they wereonly able to extricate themselves with

luck and daring. Here the narration becomes quite dramatic, and Frisch manages to evoke that sense of claustrophobia that vertigo induces in those too frightened to move. We are told that the story has been told many times by Herr Geiser, so many times that everyone has tired of it. But will it remain the most vivid and meaningful of all his memories, when it was nothing but an encounter with the void, and a fortuitous escape from its icy clutch?

In the end his daughter comes to the rescue, but maybe too late. That paralysis of his eyelid and his arm, maybe the signs of a stroke. Maybe he is dying, maybe he is already dead, as we read the concluding paragraph of the author, summarizing what it is like living in an obscure Swiss valley, with its rains, its postal bus coming three times a day, and the intermittent pictureaeness that tempts and fascinates frightened Dutch tourists.

After having read the book one becomes painfully aware of the fragility of man, manifest only in the erosion of old age, through which we are all thrust, barring catastrophes. But death and dying is a catastrophe by itself, to the individual far worse than those natural disasters of which he can only read and marvel. But the world goes on, not only without the individual, but also without mankind itself. Will Gott survive when there no longer are any men, who think that his non-existence is a logical impossibility? There are entire galaxies out there in which there are no traces of any brain whatsoever.

Der Mensch erscheint im Holozän, but the valley is maybe older, and may also survive man itself. Even when there are no men around to describe the different kinds of thunder and rain, will it thunder and rain nevertheless.

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