

Learning from the Swiss A tiny land with many languages: Switzerland demonstrates how a common culture does not have to be held back by language boundaries. What is the best way to promote multilingual literature?
By Beat Mazenauer and Francesco Biamonte



In today's media society, attention is a very valuable commodity. In an era of information overload there is a limit to how much people can truly absorb and process, and the dynamics of this "attention economy" mean that it is often crude sensationalism and simplistic messages which attract the most attention. This is also true of literature: the more demanding works tend to find themselves stranded by their own complexity. Literature prefers to avoid overly-simplistic messages but at the same time its recognition and popularity is restricted by multilingualism. Literary works still carry a certain symbolic prestige which has been conferred on them

over the years by the cultural elite. But now this special status only provides a limited benefit, as books increasingly find themselves in competition with a whole range of cultural offerings which meet today's high expectations.

As a result, publishers and all those in the cultural sector are looking for new strategies. They are promoting audio books, developing new festival formats and setting up literature houses. They are trying to bring literature to as large an audience as possible by inviting both domestic and international authors and by promoting books in a variety of languages. Those wishing to export literary works find themselves faced with two possible avenues, namely multilingual promotion and the internet as a medium for achieving this.

It is very difficult to promote literature across linguistic boundaries, as it is fundamentally tied to a language which is distinct from other languages in its everyday and artistic usage. The example of multilingual Switzerland provides a look at how these mechanisms play out, but also of how the obstacles can be overcome.

The European Union today comprises 27 member states which are connected by an institutional framework and a commu-

nal budget. But in cultural terms, Europe is still a fragmented structure which has found no common identity. The 23 official languages are basically used to carry out legislative and administrative functions.

Switzerland as a laboratory

Switzerland only has four official languages, but the country is characterised by the fact that multilingualism forms a core element of the Swiss “cultural nation.” What has held the country together if not the will to form a multilingual bond? Switzerland shares three of its four languages with its larger neighbours: Germany, France and Italy. The Swiss author and literary scholar Adolf Muschg wrote in 1990 that this fact allows all Swiss citizens to have “dual citizenship”, which “constitutes their ‘unique character.’” The Swiss are relatively willing to switch languages when necessary. The internal language barriers are high but not insurmountable, and there is a basic consensus in this respect, as shown in the results of recent cantonal referenda on the subject of language learning in schools. Even where it was least expected, the population once again confirmed their wish to see the national languages given priority over English.

The identity of multilingual Switzerland may be strengthened in this way but of course the use of different languages causes many practical problems. In terms of literature, the national languages stand side-by-

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side, each aligned with their external centre in Paris, Milan or Berlin. But despite this, there is still a sense of a unifying cultural policy within the field of literature. National institutions such as Pro Helvetia, along with various private foundations and associations, have set themselves the specific goal of spanning the linguistic gulf. They translate books, stage joint readings and organise festivals. The Swiss Literature Institute in Biel runs its courses in both German and French, and there are many other literary projects which deal with the issue of multilingualism.

In this sense, Switzerland can be viewed as a kind of European laboratory where a common culture is not held back by linguistic boundaries. Performance poetry brings literature to life on the stage. Literature festivals foster direct personal contacts. But above all, the internet has become the most mobile, efficient and cost-effective method of promoting literature. While music is a universal language requiring no translation, the spread of literature around the world is restricted by language. This is why the worldwide web contains very few literature websites which encompass more than two or three different languages. However, the huge potential of the internet makes it ideally suited to promoting literature: it can be accessed all over the world, it is flexible, subject matter can be directly linked, and it allows the use of different media (text, audio and video). This means that literary works can be presented in a multitude of ways which can still be closely combined.

But the question of translation still sparks virulent debate. It makes sense to summarise the content and then translate this into other

languages, so that a minimum of information can be provided. Longer texts would remain in the original language in order to encourage “foreign-language” reading.

One could argue that a book review is of little use if the corresponding book is not available in translation. In order to refute this argument, two target groups should be distinguished. On the one side are the publishers and promoters of literary events who use the internet to provide high-quality information. Quite apart from the international bestsellers, this kind of service can greatly expand the informal network which is already in existence. But on the other hand how is it possible to awaken the reading public's interest in a book which, up to now, they have not been able to read? In this situation a good, penetrative book review can provide the means of access. None other than Jorge Luis Borges wrote in his *Stories* that instead of writing a 500-page book, without knowing whether or not it was good, he would rather write a review of it straight away. This also brings to mind experiments such as those carried out by the French weekly magazine *Courrier Internationale*, which published book reviews from all over the world, not so much in order to encourage reading of the book but more to highlight regional linguistic characteristics.

Everyone reads

One thing is sure: quality and choice are essential ingredients for the successful crossover of foreign-language literature. But anyone who wants to attract new consumers needs to find ways of appealing to the senses in a fun, hands-on way, using

pictures, audio samples and videos. In addition, it is important to create flexible, intelligent links so that the user can not only carry out structured searches but can also enjoy stumbling upon interesting discoveries. Serendipity makes browsing much more fun. In this way the internet can be more stimulating than books, which lend themselves to quiet reading.

Literature is neither the preserve of the elite nor the stomping-ground of the layman. Everyone reads, therefore everyone should be able to actively contribute to a literary website, whether as a reviewer or by joining a discussion forum. The main problem is how to control access so that it is open to everyone but still maintains a minimum standard of quality. Nowadays, many international literature websites are sponsored by publishers and booksellers in order to generate plaudits for their own products. But a good-quality literature website needs to be neutral and cater for everyone who is interested in literature. And perhaps young people who have been turned off books by being forced to read in school would react more positively if they were given a different way of approaching literary texts. Nowadays many young people would feel much more at home downloading poetry to their i-phones.

Times – and readers – are changing. Literature should not be left behind, indeed it wants to move with the times. Spoken word performances, slam poetry, the internet – all these things can ignite a linguistic spark which knows no language boundaries. No European culture has managed to achieve this, although the idea of ‘European culture’ is becoming more deeply embedded in

people's consciousness. There are two key factors: first, digital media and personal contacts need to complement each other constantly; and second, an element of enjoyment should also be an artistic requirement. New perspectives can only really be opened up by a combination of these two.

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www.readme.cc

Readme.cc is a European literary platform designed to stimulate communication about books. Readers photograph themselves with their favourite book, comment on it and create a personal online bookshelf. Readme.cc is a space for inspiring and often surprising literary encounters. Book tips are regularly translated into many languages, and the site provides access to literary documents. Readme.cc was set up in 2005 and currently operates in ten languages (German, English, French, Italian, Danish, Slovenian, Czech, Hungarian, Arabic and Hebrew). The site receives funding from the EU's Culture Programme. Its editors are well-placed within the European literary network.

www.culturactif.ch

Culturactif.ch is a website dedicated to contemporary Swiss literature. It was created in 1997 and since 2002 has been funded by the Service de Press Suisse, an association which aims to encourage exchanges across language boundaries. It now has around 2,500 html pages and has developed into an outstanding resource for contemporary Swiss literature. The multilingual (French, Italian, German) editorial committee ensures that the mainly French site also includes regular contributions in German and Italian, to cover the whole gamut of Swiss literature. Many pages have summaries in all three languages. Every month Culturactif.ch publishes reviews, information and previously unpublished works.