

# The Fiction of Hermann Böschenstein

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In October 1969, *German Life and Letters* published a special number in honor of Hermann Böschenstein's seventieth anniversary. It contained a short biography and a bibliography—compiled by Humphrey Milnes. Among the ten books and thirty-three articles listed, there is only one item which could be considered as “creative writing”—a volume of translations: *Kanadische Lyrik: Übertragungen*.<sup>1</sup> The first item on the list is dated November 1928: an essay on George Santayana which appeared in *Schweizer Rundschau*. Few people know that Böschenstein had published a book as early as 1921—a novel entitled *Die Mutter und der neutrale Sohn*.<sup>2</sup> Of course, Milnes could not know that, in 1969, Böschenstein had a number of short stories in his desk which were to be published in 1974: *Unter Schweizern in Kanada: Kurzgeschichten*.<sup>3</sup> There is also a third book of fiction—a second novel, *Im Roten Ochsen: Geschichte einer Heimkehr*, written in the seventies.<sup>4</sup>

It must be a rare phenomenon in literary history—an author publishing two novels, one at the age of 21, the next 56 years later, at the age of 77. Another curious fact is that one of the female protagonists is based—in both works—on the same person: Böschenstein's wife Elisabeth Schoch (deceased 1976). In the first novel she appears as Elisabeth in the speculations of Böschenstein's *alter ego* Kaspar, in the 1977 novel as Martha Schneblin-Zollinger.

Böschenstein was born on May 1, 1900 in Stein am Rhein—a small Swiss town on the north side of the river, twelve miles up from Schaffhausen, and within a mile from the German border. Stein had no “Gymnasium,” and the teenager had to travel daily to Schaffhausen by train. He obtained his “Maturität” in 1919 and then registered—for a short time only—at the University of Zürich. As is to be expected, World War I commanded the attention of everybody at that time. Switzerland was “neutral,” but the borders with Germany were virtually closed. Zürich, about 30 miles from Schaffhausen, was one of the centers where German exiles met. At the Spiegelgasse, for instance, where Goethe had visited Lavater and where Büchner had lived and died, Lenin now prepared his revolution and Arp and Ball founded the Cabaret Voltaire. In Zürich appeared Schickele's periodical *Die Weissen Blätter* and Leonhard Frank's volume of “Novellen” *Der Mensch ist gut*. Böschenstein, always an avid reader of the most recent literary output, steeped himself in expressionism. After the borders were open again, he took the boat across Lake Constance and then the train to Munich. He stayed and studied in Munich, Berlin, Kiel, and Königsberg, ending up in Rostock where he received his Ph.D. in 1924.

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<sup>1</sup>Hermann Böschenstein, *Kanadische Lyrik* (Berne: Feuz, 1938).

<sup>2</sup>Hermann Böschenstein, *Die Mutter und der neutrale Sohn* (Leipzig: Xenien, 1921).

<sup>3</sup>Hermann Böschenstein, *Unter Schweizern in Kanada: Kurzgeschichten* (Basel: Gute Schriften, 1974).

<sup>4</sup>Herman Böschenstein, *Im Roten Ochsen: Geschichte einer Heimkehr* (Schaffhausen: Verlag Meier, 1977).

Böschenstein must have completed his first novel in 1920—probably in Munich since it contains a short description of his trip from Switzerland to that city. *Die Mutter und der neutrale Sohn* is, on the one hand, a typical example of expressionist prose, on the other, one of the earliest parodies of the expressionist novel. It is a clever book—with several layers of meaning.

*Die Mutter und der neutrale Sohn* consists of three parts and an appendix. The central figure in the first part is Erika—the mother. Her biography is given in one short page—in the rapid notation invented by Kasimir Edschmid in 1915 (*Die sechs Mündungen*). The following sentence is typical: “Sie ging nach Hause, schloss die Fenster ihres Zimmers und spielte ein wenig Violine, aber wie gesagt, zur Künstlerin war sie nicht schamlos genug.” Characteristic of Böschenstein’s kind of writing is the use of plastic expressions for abstract phenomena, for instance: “Sie musste einen Glauben haben, um dessen Nacken sie die Arme schlingen[konnte].”

The author’s sense of irony and parody becomes apparent from the second page. A leitmotif of expressionism is “der Schrei,” the scream. Erika, meditating on a bench, hears a scream. She jumps up and finds a child on the bank of a river. A note left with the child explains that the child’s mother had jumped into the water. In her surprise, Erika swears in Swiss German: “Gottfried Stutz!” There is an abundance of expressionist pathos in the novel, but it is never sustained: in each case Böschenstein destroys the pathetic mood by throwing in Swiss dialect expressions, irony, and parody.

Erika is a “super-woman” and a “neuer Mensch.” Having found this child, she immediately changes her life and abandons her studies. “. . . jauchzend dringt es jetzt heraus: ich werde Kinderschwester.” While working as a nurse, Erika brings up the boy she had found and joins—by pure accident—a left-wing organization. In expressionism, things usually happen without apparent motives: “Auf einmal wurde sie zur Präsidentin gewählt, stand nun vorne, wurde Brennpunkt aller Augen, fühlte sich schwindelnd emporgeschleudert wie ein tanzender Ball auf Wasserstrahlen, aus ihrem Zentrum drang heiliger Wille in schmeichelnde Düfte von Phrasen, sie sauste auf Flügeln rauschender Reden umher und wiederholte immer den einen Schrei, aus Glaube und Eitelkeit: Revolution!” (p. 12).

Internal evidence suggests that the second part of the novel begins on page 13 (Parts I and III are indicated properly, but the figure II is nowhere to be found. I suspect the author did this intentionally since—later in the book—he reproduces some passages from Kaspar’s diary, numbering them 1, 3 and 4!). Erika has adopted the boy she had found and—ironically—called him Kaspar. He is now about twenty years old, and she sends him out into the world: “Sie schickte ihn in die Welt hinaus, er sollte Heerscharen sammeln und am Tage des Kampfes zu ihr stossen. Aber seine Erlebnisse waren andere, nach den ersten Schritten schwankte er, Farben, Mädchen und Musik verwirrten ihn”(p. 13).

There follows a long series of letters which Kaspar writes to his mother—they explain the title of the book. While Erika (like Germany) is a revolutionary, Kaspar—and he is partly an autobiographical projection of Böschenstein—remains “neutral,” just like Switzerland during the War. Sometimes he feels like a coward, and in one instance he tries to impress a girl by telling her lies about his heroism in battle. The passage is a hilarious parody of Edschmid’s style.

Again and again, Kaspar thinks of Elisabeth. Sometimes he soberly tells himself that it would be best to go home, marry her, and become a respectable and useful citizen. On other occasions he puts his longing for her into the form of a parody on expressionist prose: "Aufsprang er und fühlte Sehnsucht, gegen die man toben, schreien, springen, wandern, weinen, wund sich schlagen könnte, dass es eine Freude war. Rasch stürzte er ins Freie, warf sich in die Wälder, stemmte sich von Baum zu Baum, zog Schritt um Schritt aus weichen Feldern, erstieg die Müdigkeit . . ." (p. 20).

Böschstein's novel contains a number of amusing stylistic experiments. One of Kaspar's letters—written when he is drunk—is mainly composed of sentences from German "Trinklieder." Later on Böschstein inserts dadaist prose and poetry. Several of Kaspar's letters contain hilarious anecdotes and humorous pseudophilosophical reflections. Evidently, Böschstein had read *Schloss Nornepygge* and/or other books by Max Brod and was familiar with Brod's "Indifferentismus." The high point of part II is, no doubt, the only letter Erika ever sent to her son—in answer to more than a dozen of his letters. The text is as follows:

Ich glaubte, Du wolltest die Erde zerstampfen, nun kriechst Du wie ein Wurm darüber hin. Würmer kann man nicht peitschen, nur zertreten. Ich habe grosse Lust dazu, Du rückenloses Wesen. Mir ekelt vor Dir, der Du unfähig bist der Strammheit aufragenden Leibes. Weiber und Lieder sind Dir in die Knie gefahren. Nun suchst Du Deinen Schlotter zu heilen mit Pfarrer und Bibelsprüchen . . . Raffe Dich zusammen! Lass Deine Wahnsinnswuchten kreisen und fräse hinein in die Paläste der Schlemmer, durch die Hälse der Prasser, und wandle lachend über die Zacken ihrer Trümmer. Führe mich zum Tanze unter den Bögen ihrer Blutstrahlen! Revolution! (p. 26)

Towards the end of the second part we find parodies of Edschmid ("Wie herrlich, sich selbst zu erahnen, sich erschauernd abzutasten, indem ich mit den Händen esse, in den Wagen eines reichen Mannes steige, hemdärmelig zur Kirche gehe, Frauen prügeln, singe, fluche, miau mache und sonst alles, was der Leib nur kann!" p. 31), of "Indifferentismus" ("Er fühlte, dass die Darstellung dieser vollkommenen Gleichgültigkeit einen Ausdruck verlangte . . ." p. 35), and of dadaism of the Kurt Schwitters variety:

Apfelmus auf deinen Händen  
 Hosiannah die Zigarre.  
 Den Papier geschnitten wenden,  
 Maienkäfer an den Wänden,  
 Alles feine frische Ware  
 Doch der Strohhut an den Füßen  
 Und der ganze Kegelklub,  
 Springen Hühner Hähne müssen  
 Dada - wada - lada - wup. (pp. 38-39)

Part II ends with Kaspar trying to become a new man; he pities and helps the poor, refuses to accompany his friend into the army, has visions and dreams and wants to be like a tree: "Wie der Baum will ich sein! rief Kaspar, von allen Seiten nimmt er, nach allen Seiten gibt er" (p. 44). His friend dies in battle; in a way, Kaspar now feels ashamed, a coward—a "neutral." Kaspar drowns his sorrows: "[Er] stürzte mit Sicherheit entgegen seinem letzten, besten Freund, dem Wein" (p. 49).

Part III consists of two pages and is devoted, like part I, to Erika. Her search for justice has taken on gigantic proportions. In the end she is hit by a bullet. The appendix has three pages and is entitled "Satyrspiel." Kaspar drowns his sorrows: [Er] stürzte mit Sicherheit entgegen seinem letzten, of a hunt, and hangs himself with his suspenders. The last sentence: "Er fiel, und die Hosenträger waren stark genug."

Böschenstein has called his work a "Jugendsünde." This little novel, however, is one of the most interesting pieces of expressionist prose. Here is a highly intelligent man, familiar with the authors of the day: Edschmid, Frank, Sternheim, Schwitters, who intends to write a novel which will be largely autobiographical. Since he is acquainted with all expressionist techniques of writing, he uses them—but while using them he feels that he is not being original, that he is artificially making up a style which does not really suit him. Hence the irony and the parodies. In a way, Böschenstein was in the same position as Caesar von Arx, the Swiss dramatist, who tried to produce an expressionist play—and turned out a parody: *Moritat*. Von Arx, too, left Switzerland for Germany after the War and spent the years 1920-1923 in Leipzig. Böschenstein's early novel is an inverted expressionist tale: it is usually the father who is conservative and the son who is a revolutionary, while the mother—standing between father and son—suffers. In this novel, there is no father at all, the mother is the revolutionary, and the son the conservative. I know of no other expressionist novel with this parodistic sort of constellation.

There seems to have been no great echo to *Die Mutter und der neutrale Sohn*. In 1924, Böschenstein continued his peregrinations: he worked as a private tutor in Austria, traveled in Italy and France, went to Canada (including the West Coast), and then did what he had advised in his novel: "Zu Elisabeth wollte er, sie heiraten, Kinder mit ihr zeugen, Haus und Hof mehren, Mineralien sammeln, Goethes sämtliche Gedichte auswendig lernen . . ." (p. 44). He returned to Switzerland in May 1928, married, and emigrated a second time to Canada where he became Professor of German at the University of Toronto. In 1942, Böschenstein took leave of absence and became Director of the Canadian War Prisoners' Aid of the Y.M.C.A. In 1946, he returned to his university position.

The eighteen short stories and anecdotes collected in *Unter Schweizern in Kanada*, all told in the first person singular, cover the years 1926 to about 1947. They seem to be strictly autobiographical; they are written in an unassuming, polished German—reminding one of Meinrad Inglin's prose. Böschenstein is less interested in the Canadian landscape than in the characters he describes: mainly people he knew during his vagabond days in the Twenties (1926-1928) and during World War II. In 1927, Böschenstein worked as a doorman in Victoria (British Columbia) where he met a number of highly unpleasant immigrants: a conceited German who knew everything better; immigrants who were too proud to adjust to a different way of life; ruthless crooks who had no scruples to rob even those who had helped them formerly. Böschenstein's best stories are the bitter ones, and the unsavory characters are most memorable. One of his outstanding figures is Wirz who, with 30,000 dollars in his pocket, manages to convince his poor compatriots to work for him and feed him.

During World War II, Böschenstein traveled all over Canada, bringing relief to hundreds of Germans in prison camps. He describes a number of pleasant, unpleasant, and hilarious situations; the best story in this section

of the book is devoted to McCurdy, conductor of the weekly train from Sioux Lookout to Port Arthur. Chronologically the last tale seems to be "Richmond"—which describes the homecoming of a crippled soldier after World War II. To conclude from the tenor of the eighteen stories, Böschenstein is still a pacifist and more interested in lower-class people than in others. He has a good heart and—as to solidarity—an attitude halfway between Hemingway and the early Steinbeck.

In many ways, these sketches represent—from an artistic point of view—Böschenstein's most convincing book. The ambition, the literary cleverness, and the sense of parody which stood behind his expressionist novel have disappeared. The sketches are the work of an older man who has gone through many hardships and who has few illusions left. But he has not become a cynic; he has preserved a good sense of humor and his irony.

The volume, however, is not even: some short stories and character sketches are impressive and of high quality, others are rather superficial or just anecdotes. While *Unter Schweizern in Kanada* is, probably, Böschenstein's most readable book and tells us more about the author than *Die Mutter und der neutrale Sohn* or *Im Roten Ochsen*, it is, from the point of view of the literary critic, less interesting than the two novels.

Having returned to the University of Toronto in 1946, Böschenstein became Head of the German Department in 1956, published the two volumes of his major work of literary criticism, *Deutsche Gefühlskultur* (1956, 1966) and retired in 1972. At that point, he decided to write a novel—a novel about his home town of Stein am Rhein and about his friends there. After World War II, Böschenstein and his wife had returned to Stein often, had owned an apartment there, and kept in close touch with friends and relatives. For a time they had considered returning permanently to Stein, but then had decided to stay on in Toronto for at least a few months every year—to be near their children.

There are at least three books to which *Im Roten Ochsen* can be compared: Gottfried Keller's *Martin Salander*, Wilhelm Raabe's *Stopfkuchen* and *Abu Telfan*. (Böschenstein has published two books on Keller and written extensively on Raabe in the second volume of *Deutsche Gefühlskultur*.) The style of *Im Roten Ochsen* is quite unique and personal; it is, in many ways, reminiscent of Arnold Kübler's style.

The novel is told in the third-person singular. Karl Schneblin (Böschenstein) returns with his wife Martha (Elisabeth) to Gandurum (Stein am Rhein) where they own an apartment. While Karl and his former schoolfriends spend much time behind drinks in the Gasthaus "Zum Roten Ochsen" (it exists under this name in Stein am Rhein, and even Elsi, the waitress, is genuine), Martha often travels to Scafusien (Schaffhausen) where she has relatives. Karl and his wife do not come from Canada, but—like Leonhard Hagebucher in *Abu Telfan* and Eduard in *Stopfkuchen*—from Africa where Karl (who has studied agriculture) runs a plantation. Hagebucher's purpose in returning was—says Böschenstein in *Deutsche Gefühlskultur*—"seinen deutschen Zeitgenossen die Leviten zu lesen, ihnen den kritischen Spiegel vorzuhalten und bessere öffentliche Zustände zu erzwingen" (II, p. 231). *Martin Salander* was written with a similar purpose in mind—by a disillusioned and bitter man. Schneblin has little in common with Hagebucher or Salander, but resembles Eduard—who has not come in order to criticize, but to meet old friends and to hear the story of Heinrich Schaumann and Tinchen Quakatz. Raabe tells us little about

Eduard, and we learn even less about Karl Schneblin's life after he had left Switzerland. As in the case of *Stopfkuchen*, we are informed about the fate of those who had continued to live at home. Böschenstein tells us how his compatriots had fared during the depression, during World War II, and during the "Wirtschaftswunder." Clearly, Karl has often been homesick; living in Africa, he has envied those who had been able to make their career in Gandurum. Many welcome him with enthusiasm; he has some sincere friends—people with golden hearts who could have stepped over from a novel by Leonhard Frank. There is some social criticism—mainly connected with the person of Alfred who has had a miserable life with his foster father; and also: some of the local people had sympathized with the Nazis.

Karl devotes his time in Gandurum to two main tasks: he renews contacts with his friends of fifty years ago, and he writes down his memoirs in connection with the first "Flugtag" in Gandurum. This took place a few years before World War I. The story of Reverend Gysi, who built Gandurum's first airplane ("Leichter-als-die-Luft") and its pilot Gustav (a student at the "Gymnasium" and—partly—a projection of young Böschenstein) has all the humor and irony of Gottfried Keller's "Novellen" about Seldwyla. It takes up more than a third of the novel and is a masterpiece of historical realism, irony, and humor. Gustav dies in the end, but one can just as well laugh as cry about this denouement of a revolutionary teenager.

As in his first novel, Böschenstein is quite self-conscious; why is Karl writing a novel? He has made up his mind, "Gandurum auf die literarische Landkarte zu setzen" (p. 28). But is he capable of writing a good novel? He puts his own skepticism into the mouth of the publisher to whom Martha has shown parts of the manuscript: (1) Why write about Gandurum rather than about Africa? A novel about Africa would find more readers. (2) Is the author—after spending too many years away from home—capable of dealing with this very Swiss topic? ("Verfasser dürfte zu lange im Ausland gelebt haben, um sich in der Seelenverfassung unseres Menschenschlages noch auszukennen. Die Psychologie des Homo helveticus hat schon tieferen Den kern, als Herr Schneblin einer ist, grosse Rätsel gestellt." P. 139) There are two more points which carry less weight.

Böschenstein's novel did, indeed, put Stein am Rhein on the literary map. The present writer passed through Stein in October 1977; the novel was prominently displayed in the one little bookstore there. The press had received the book with enthusiasm. Visiting the "Rote Ochsen," I met the lady called Elsi in the book, and she confirmed that the novel was being read by everybody in the region; the "Rote Ochsen" was profiting from the book.

While most of the novel is amusing and—for the initiated—probably hilarious, by far the best part is the "novel in the novel": the story of the "Leichter-als-die-Luft." The rest is—in tone and atmosphere—somewhat too low-key; like Eduard in *Stopfkuchen*, Karl remains a rather colorless figure; Böschenstein is no Max Frisch and too modest and too discreet about himself—and about his wife and his friends. When he writes about the frescos and the Americans to whom they are explained, he is excellent. But the moment he touches upon his friends or himself, the novel loses color and vitality. No such inhibitions prevail in connection with Reverend Gysi, Gustav and the airplane. This had happened before World War I—and nobody could possibly be offended now.

Evaluating Böschenstein's fiction, one comes to the conclusion that he could easily have become an author of the stature of Inglin or Kübler—had he continued to write fiction after 1921. His expressionist novel is a unique document; now rediscovered, it will always have a place in the canon of expressionist literature. The sketches of 1974 will be recognized as one of the few outstanding works in the meagre field of ethnic literature (German) in Canada. *Im Roten Ochsen* will have a respectable place in histories of Swiss-German literature; the best chance for long survival and a large readership has "Leichter-als-die-Luft"—a "Novelle" which can stand the comparison with some of Keller's tales in *Die Leute von Seldwyla* and which can easily be detached from the novel and transferred into an anthology.