

On the death of Max Frisch : the difficulty of choosing one's self

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On the death of Max Frisch

The Difficulty of Choosing One's Self

Max Frisch died on 4 April 1991, shortly before his 80th birthday. Indisputably, Frisch is one of the major German-language writers of the second half of the present century and his many-faceted work has never ceased to fascinate and irritate large numbers of international readers and theatregoers.

In 1950 his "Sketchbook 1946-1949" appeared. It is situated at the beginning of the post-war period and builds on the experience of the Second World War. It includes reflexions on the present and the immediate past and thoughts about art, literature and the theatre, as well as themes and sketches for his future writings: it contains the germ of a large part of Frisch's complete works. In addition in places it is a highly poetic work, which praises the beauty of the world and the redeeming grace of life. In this connection Frisch makes a distinction between time and transience which we perceive in that "our existence is always confronted by another, which we call death." It is this very consciousness of his own mortality that makes man aware of the beauty of life.

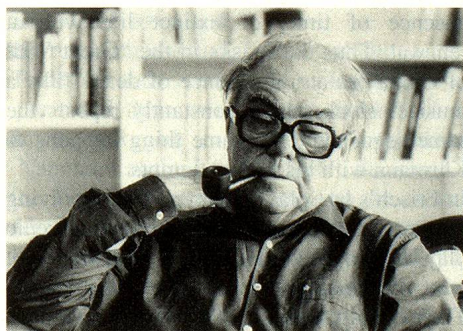
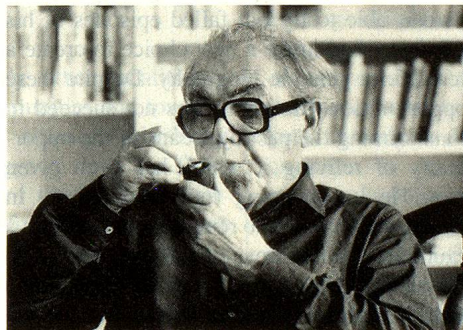
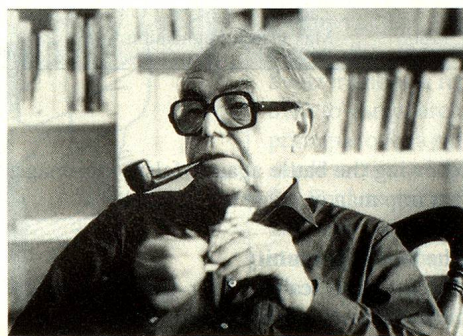
Escape from the wrong life

And then the thought can suddenly strike him that the life he has lived so far was not the only right one; that a completely different life might be possible. Thus the rittmaster in his early romance "Santa Cruz" suddenly leaves for Hawaii; with the vessel of great expectation he sails towards the fulfilment of all desires in a magical, faraway place. The sculptor Stiller in "I'm not Stiller" flees from the unbearable narrowness of his previous existence for the eternal spring of the floating gardens of a dreamt-of Mexico, of another real life.

In the play "Now They Sing Again" an air force officer, after a crash, enters the realm of the dead and is shaken by the discovery that he should have lived differently. Feeling that he is in a completely different world, he realises after his death that the life he had lived was wrong.

The fateful image

The secret fear of failure through not living the true life haunts Frisch and permeates his work. He searches for the reasons for possible



The fear of failure through not living the true life permeates all Max Frisch's writings. (Photos: Michael von Graffenried)

failure and finds them in living according to a wrong plan or, as he puts it, according to an image which does not correspond to one's true self. In his first Sketchbook he writes: "It is said that thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image of God. This could be taken to mean: God as that which lives in everyone, that which cannot be grasped. It is a sin we commit almost unceasingly time and time again, just as we are sinned against."

Except when we love

This is a key passage, which expresses a truth of eminent importance for the whole of Frisch's work. The perceiving human being creates mental images: of the world and how it appears, of events and happenings, and especially of people, of You, who through this image can be changed and confined. Man also creates images of his own self: by so doing he elevates himself to become his own creator, but at the same time locks himself into the prison of this self-created image, which from now on pins him down, immobilizes him and sets him on the wrong path of life.

Thus Stiller destroys his wife, Julika, through the image of her he has created himself and finally also destroys himself through an imagined self which he cannot live up to.

The main character in the novel "Homo Faber" is a man who is nothing but a rational technician and creates for himself the image of a completely calculable world which excludes coincidences and feelings. But as the story develops, Walter Faber is forced to live through the devastating experience of a total collapse of this world which crushes him beneath its ruins. He has to make the discovery that nothing in that world is right. In the play "Andorra" the preconceived image of the Jews determines the fate of the supposedly Jewish youth, Andri, turns him into someone who he in fact is not and drives him to destruction. "Andorra" is the tragedy of a life which founders and is destroyed through an image.

The true life

The awareness of mortality makes men realise that beauty and transience are mutually challenging and dependent, that life and death are



interrelated. In the dramatic farce "The Great Wall of China" a masked party is taking place at the court of a Chinese emperor, whose guests are the masks of historical characters long since dead, including Romeo and Juliet. Romeo, the lover, puts the thoughtful question whether death really is the end, oblivion, or whether the whole of the past goes on silently, with no hope of an all-transforming death. "Death is nothing but regret, the ultimate knowledge that we have missed the one path to redemption, life." Here, for the first time, Frisch formulates the interdependence of life and death.

What for Romeo is a mental game becomes a real experience for Stiller. After he has realised in America that his escape has failed, he wants to make a really radical break and put an end to his life. He bungles the attempt but now he is given the privilege of a unique experience: he lives his death without dying "as a state of total powerlessness accompanied by total wakefulness; only time had disappeared, time as the medium within which we normally act; everything stayed as it was, nothing passed away, everything remained like that once and for all."

And now he realises that his previous life was no real life, because he always refused to accept it, as the man he is in reality. Only those who have chosen their own selves and are thus identical to their own selves live a real

existence; only after real life can there be real death. Thus redemption is a gift of grace. It has to come from men and happens in life and through life within time; it must be achieved by men themselves.

This self-deliverance is accomplished by choosing the real life and by constantly

Significant dates

15.5.1911	Born in Zurich
1930-34	Read German at Zurich University
1936-40	Studied architecture at Federal Institute of Technology, Zurich
1942-54	Own architect's bureau in Zurich
From 1955	Freelance writer
1960-65	Rome, subsequently Berzona (Canton Ticino), Berlin, New York and Zurich
1978	Max Frisch Archive at the FIT, Zurich
1980	Max Frisch Foundation

renewing the battle against falsifying images that trap man in a fate that is not his.

The lost opportunity

Frisch simply cannot bear that men should be bound up with such a fate, which degrades them because it can cause life to fail. As a result he writes the play "Biography" whose hero is able to try out failed episodes of his life anew and make a new choice to create a real life, a genuine biography. Despite these opportunities, Kürmann does not succeed in transforming the past by means of the opportunity of reliving it which has been given him. He keeps going round pointlessly in circles which bring no renewal and becomes a cautionary mirror image for the reader.

Frisch has found a meaningful symbol for the lack of change of such circles: the musical clock, whose figures always make the same movements. It is a symbol of timelessness and absence of time, of extinct life without renewal. Thus the masks in the "Great Wall of China" rotate in a dance of death "like a musical clock which constantly repeats the same sequence"; the same thing happens to Kürmann with his futile attempts.

In Frisch's last play "Triptych" the revolving motion of the musical clock becomes a scenic play. It is a play about death and the dead, who are among themselves in their Hades. Their eternity consists of a continuous repetition of the past, with no expectation of anything new or of any future. Unredeemed, they circle around their failed lives, repeat the same sentences, make the same gestures. Transient life is a time of grace because it offers the possibility of decision and choice

and of changing one's self and the world. But in death there is no time, which is the medium for creating and changing. The dead do not have choice which constitutes the dignity of the living. "Biography" and "Triptych" stand in the same relationship as life and death. It is "Triptych" which gives the game with the biography its profound meaning and importance. Kürmann does not succeed in renewing his own self. He fails to choose himself and the true life within the framework of time, and thus risks being condemned to futile circling in the realm of the dead, as it appears in "Triptych".

Now the great connection becomes apparent: man is responsible for his life and his own death, which can only result from a true life. However, this is endangered by distorting images, which can cause life to fail. For life to succeed the images must be overcome to clear the way to oneself and make self-choice possible, so that these selves become identical. Through constant renewal the real life should be achieved and through this the real death and redemption prepared.

It is with this process that Frisch is mainly concerned. In his political commitment, especially in his criticism of Switzerland, he is often unfair and lacks objectivity and moderation. But his commitment is primarily not political and consists of his unconditional sympathy for mankind, the call to live one's life so that it becomes real and so that through it other people and communities should also benefit.

Hans Jürg Lüthi

Major works

1940:	Leaves from a Knapsack
1943:	J'adore ce qui me brûle oder die Schwierigen (novel)
1944:	Santa Cruz. A romance
1945:	Bin or the Journey to Peking (narrative)
1946:	Now They Sing Again. Attempt at a Requiem
1946:	The Great Wall of China. A farce
1949:	When the War Was Over (play)
1950:	Sketchbook 1946-1949
1951/61:	Count Öderland
	Street ballad in 12 pictures
1953:	Don Juan or the Love of Geometry (Comedy in 5 acts)
1954:	I'm Not Stiller (novel)
1957:	Homo Faber. A report
1958:	The Fire Raisers
	A morality without a moral
1961:	Andorra. Play in 12 scenes
1964:	A Wilderness of Mirrors (novel)
1967:	Biography. A game
1971:	Wilhelm Tell: a School Text
1972:	Sketchbook 1966-1971
1974:	Army Service Book
1975:	Montauk (narrative)
1978:	Triptych. Three scenic plays
1978:	Man in the Holocaust
	A narrative
1982:	Bluebeard. A narrative

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