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THE JURA AND THE ALPS

By HENRI DE ZIEGLER

"When the Good Lord created the Jura, he still had a good deal to learn." These words are ascribed to the Genevese novelist Victor Cherbuliez (1829-1899), who became a member of the Académie Française. It expresses the feeling that the poor little Jura, with its monotonous melancholy, cannot stand comparison with the triumphal splendour of the neighbouring Alps. To Cherbuliez, the Alps were a masterpiece of Creation, the Jura a mere preliminary trial.

This is a fairly common viewpoint, among the Genevese as well as others. But it is hardly defensible, historically speaking, since it was the formation of the Alps that led to the creation of the Jura, whose parallel ridges seem like petrified waves thrown up in the reaction of the rearing up of the Alpine massif on the opposite banks of the Rhone. However, it is not the relative ages of those two chains of mountains that is of primary interest here, but rather the impressions they awaken and the varied pleasures they can afford us.

Every citizen of Geneva lives in intimate contact with both the Jura and the Alps. From the left bank of the Rhone or of Lake Geneva, he is constantly aware of the Jura rising in the background; and from the right bank of either body of water, it is the Alps which inevitably catch the eye. There is a definite advantage to be gained from this proximity to two quite different ranges of mountains: the gentle repetitiveness of the western peaks serves to distract and relax the eye from the restless mobility of the others.

Because the Jura mountains come quite close to the city of Geneva, and lie to the west of it, they make the Genevese evenings appreciably shorter than they would otherwise be. But, while it may steal some hours of sunshine from us, the Jura chain also gives us an opportunity to admire the full panoply of Alpine magnificence. Its role as a superb vantage point is a time-honoured one: in October 1779, after climbing the Dôle, Goethe wrote:

"Ever and again, the row of sparkling ice-mountains drew the eye and the soul. The sun bent toward evening and illuminated their great surfaces for us. Even from down below near the lake, what great black rock-ridges, teeth, towers and walls rise up in serried rows, forming wild, monstrous, impenetrable courtyards! But then, when they are suddenly visible in all their variety in the purity and clarity of the open-air — then the observer must gladly relinquish all pretensions to a sense of the infinite, for he sees that his vision and his thoughts cannot even embrace the finite."

And this feeling, of which Goethe wrote so eloquently, can be obtained from the top of every Jura peak.

The lure of the Alps

The Alps seem tumultuous — "chaotic", Goethe called them. But only someone who had never wandered through those mountains could fail to see what symmetry, what controlled — one might even say classical — rhythm, is to be found in their masterful landscapes. In writing this sentence, the image flashes through my mind of the crescent of peaks surrounding the high, dry basin of Arolla in the Valais. There is nothing in all the Jura to compare with that wild yet harmonious splendour.

The greatest thing which the Alps have to offer us, it seems to me, is their irresistible attraction. Among my fellow citizens of Geneva, the Alps have from olden times aroused many to find their vocation and avocation. This is evidenced by the vital role which Geneva and the Genevese have played in the opening up of the Alpine world and the conquest of its highest peaks, beginning with Mont Blanc and the massif which bears its name.

Geneva has also played a key part in the scientific study of the jagged spine of Europe, which for centuries had intimidated the spirits of most Europeans. There was, for example, the Genevese Horace-Bénédict de Saussure (1740-1799), and the wealth of fruitful work he left behind. How much precise yet passionate research was subsequently modelled on the early example which he set! A time would come when a taste for alpinism would spread across the world; but it had its start in Geneva, thanks largely to the pioneer work of Saussure.

Contrary to a widespread impression, Jean-Jacques Rousseau never actually penetrated the world of the glaciers. Moderate, peaceful landscapes, such as those found around the Lake of Bièvre, for example, were the ones which stimulated him to write his love-lost accounts of nature. But his thinking moved many others to devote more attention to the region of the High Alps, which up to that time had been little known.

It seems appropriate at this point to mention those Romantic painters who were either born in Geneva, or else used it as a stop en route to their aesthetic discovery of the Alpine world. There were Alexandre Calame and François Diday, who drew much inspiration from the Alps. They were the forerunners of Ferdinand Hodler, who also worked for a long time in Geneva, and of the Grisons master Giovanni Segantini. These artists undertook a new kind of conquest of the Alps. To what extent they succeeded, may be judged by works which hang today in all the museums of Europe.

In each Genevese, one might say, there are two souls, one belonging to the Alps and another to the Jura — an enthusiastic excitability, and a tendency to sombre meditation.

What is hidden in those more remote ridges radiates a mysterious but powerful charm. No glaciers or steeply soaring peaks, no wildly tumbling cataracts and walls of rock rearing heavenward. Rather, mighty forests and countless narrow gorges, through the stillness of which flow slow, green rivers and streams. These empty into lakes which might almost be the eyes of the earth; their blue seems forever darkened by a drop of melancholy, and their depths seem lonesome, saddened by the absence of human affection. Above the grey of sheer rock faces are broad mountain pastures which, in summer, are reminiscent of the steppes. It is this serious atmosphere which Gustave Courbet sought to capture in his splendid landscapes. In the springtime, the scene is enlivened by the light green of deciduous trees, the yellow of daffodils and the yellow-white of the narcissus.

One does not meet Genevese in this region very often. It has an alienating effect upon them; they miss those sparks of cheerfulness which they seem to feel even at the foot of overwhelming mountains in the Haute Savoie, the Valais and the Bernese Oberland. To some extent, the Jura is a land of pensive melancholy. In its shadows, only those people feel at home who, like La Fontaine, find benevolence in the "sombres plaisirs" — the darker pleasures of life.

[S.N.T.O.]