

# C.F. Ramuz and his native inheritance

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# G. F. RAMUZ AND HIS NATIVE INHERITANCE

*"Ramuz a été le créateur et l'ouvrier d'une langue: ce n'est pas seulement un romancier, c'est un poète épique". Paul Claudel.*

Little has been heard during the past years of Charles Ferdinand Ramuz, the Swiss novelist and poet from the canton of Vaud, who died in 1947, supremely a man of the mountains—"C'est au-delà qu'il faut que j'aïlle". He was born in 1878 in Lausanne, thereafter spending twelve years of his youth in Paris. It was from his long exile away from Vaud that his mind, now infused with an acute nostalgia, could conceive in those early years the "peasant" novels which made his name. Once the pressure of events had driven him back to his native highlands, he never left them, living successively at le Treytorrens, Lausanne and Pully. He lived there for over thirty years, a solitary sage who preferred to remain a countryman and a primitive, thus limiting his work mainly to studies of Swiss peasantry in their natural setting. In the peasant Ramuz saw the heir of natural man, closely linked with nature and untroubled by the social and ideological servitudes of the bourgeoisie.

## Picture of a poetical humanity

Although he lived on the northern shores of Lac Léman, his mountain landscapes, as shown particularly in "La grande peur dans la montagne" (1926), are more reminiscent of the vast perspectives of the Bernese Oberland and of the quaint villages around Mürren. This was then one of the more primitive Swiss religions, where peasant life had remained at a level of bare literacy and subsistence, leaving little margin for contingencies. From this type of country, where human dwellings are dwarfed by the gigantic expanses of nature, Ramuz was to extract much material for his sociological works.

Ramuz gave a written picture of primitive human feelings, the rhythm and phrasing of which intimately recall the slopes of the Léman basin that surround Lausanne and Vevey. A beautiful and distinctive "paysage" of both pastures and vineyards overlooking the

Rhône valley, the luminous expanse of Lake Geneva, and the splendour of the Alpine peaks on the distant horizon. His language belongs to such an exclusively French civilisation that it took sometime before he won a more general critical recognition. Quite positively his true vein lay in the poetical novel, simple, sober, yet absorbing. "Aline" (1905) centres around a poor girl who has been seduced, abandoned, and driven to suicide; "Les Circonstances de la vie" (1907) depicts the love affairs of a stranger who succeeds in separating a husband from his wife; "Jean Luc persécuté" (1909) portrays a madman in the throes of unintelligible frenzied exploits and a mind trained for misguided actions. The undoubted classic of Ramuz, "La vie de Samuel Belet" (1913), retraces the life of a sinner confined in his own egotism and susceptibility, who manages to free himself through experience.

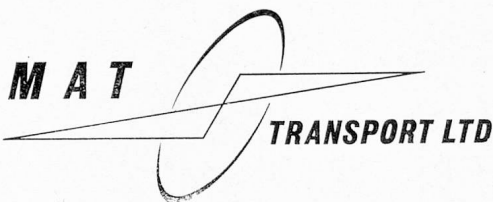
## A religion for the land of his fathers

His own "pays", as Ramuz pointed out in his book "Paris, Notes d'un Vaudois", was a tiny one—"Elle n'a guère qu'une centaine de kilomètres dans un sens, tout au plus une quarantaine dans l'autre"—merely one of the twenty two cantons of Switzerland, yet "une terre réelle". Although he could not claim a peasant upbringing himself, he was of remote peasant extraction, and very much proud of it. His first contact with Paris was a trifle overwhelming to the "petit Vaudois" who had just come from a land where almost the only monuments to the past were those of nature. The city of the plains appeared as a setting where man regained his normal stature and no longer played the dwarfs to nature's giants; where nature was attuned to man's wishes and where the natural man conceded his place to social man, a being of intellect and not of instinct. Paris to him, "c'est l'abstraction, l'idée, l'invention, le principe abstrait . . .", in the long run it cured all his rather mixed feelings: he had roots in his own tiny homeland, and go back he must—back to his corner of Europe perched on the frontiers of three great civilisations and three languages, where "the waters

hesitate between the Rhône and the Rhine". To leave Paris for "Le pays de Vaud" was no impoverishment; in fact, he took root there again by the lakeside both quietly and naturally, as if there never had been an uprooting. Through the vineyards that rise terrace by terrace to the sloping pastures, amongst the fishermen, farmers, woodcutters, and artisans he had known in his youth, he once again came home "to lift his eyes unto the hills". As he says in "Le grand printemps" "Ah! hantise d'un pays qu'on porte en soi parce qu'on n'y est pas, paysage intérieur qui vous cache les autres. Est-ce parce que je l'ai trop aimé que j'ai voulu y revenir, n'est-ce pas bien plutôt parce que j'avais fini par en être intérieurement obsédé?"

## The power of the mountain

And so, back to the mountains which, in spite of the mystery that surrounds them, is simply a rather familiar "façon de vivre" to the Swiss. We would do well to point out the certain effect that the "mountaineer personality" had on Ramuz's literary endeavours. The age-old tradition of the mountaineers is independence. Whatever his form of resistance, the mountaineer clings to his own habits and values. Moreover, the highlander traditionally finds that the conditions of his existence force him to lead a remote life away from other men, but nearer to the beasts—solitude is truly his natural clime. The mountain is to him remote, austere and indifferent. Its solid mass is there both during calm and storm, its precipices await his unwary foot, its glaciers and snows are a perpetual menace to the lower valleys where villages nestle together; if there is threat of storm or peril it can only come from the mountain. The flocks and herds are led up to the high pastures when the snows have receded for the brief summer months and are then hurried down to fold before the Autumn weather cloaks the landscape again in its white clutches. This, then, was to be part of his native inheritance; his thoughts all take shape from that one overpowering reality.



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## A "Vaudois" realism

Ramuz felt that his literary efforts should be directed towards the lives of his native *Vaudois*. This, however, held for him certain paradoxical implications, for the divergences between the "good" French and the "popular" French spoken by the peasant *Vaudois*, was strongly apparent. The former was a bookish, professional, diplomatic language, basically unreal for him. It was the latter, however, a language not much written in: a spoken, living form of communication, that Ramuz chose to write. As he makes clear in his "Lettre à Bernard Grasset": "J'ai écrit une langue qui n'était pas écrite (pas encore). J'insiste sur le point que je ne l'ai fait que par amour du vrai, par goût profond de l'authentique . . . j'ajoute, par "fidélité". J'ai essayé d'écrire une langue parlée: la langue parlée par ceux dont je suis né. J'ai essayé de me servir d'une langue-geste qui continuât à être celle dont on se servait autour de moi, non de la langue-signe qui était dans les livres." Whatever criticisms may have been generated over the Ramuzian style, its laconic expressiveness, its lack of formal structure, he succeeds admirably in capturing the authentic speech of the man of the land. Furthermore, the difficulty in rendering authentically rural a literary form destined like most literature for the middle-class was overcome by the author as soon as he had been recognised and acclaimed as a true *Vaudois*, qualified to paint the vast structure of peasant mentality and environmental conditions. Quite truly, the influence of the urban proletariat on literature was twofold. As readers, working people promulgated a mass of popular and lively fiction, and as subjects, they offered writers a whole new field of observation and comment. In spite of the renewed importance of poetry, the novel became the most representative "genre" of the age, and has continued to be so until today. Like Balzac before him, Ramuz found his true vein through consistent analysis of the characters of his own country and epoch. Enlarged in scope and raised in status, the nineteenth and then twentieth century novel not only mirrored society, but was a medium through which its exponents could express much more comprehensively than before, the general philosophy of the times.

### Biblical and Claudelian affinities

The antithesis that found expression in his novels contrasted (as Paul Claudel observes in "Du côté de chez Ramuz") between the "mythical hinterland" of the great mountains and the tranquil human warmth of the lakeside, between the inhuman and the human, the mysterious and the known. Nourished as he was on Aeschylus and the Greek myths, Ramuz was equipped to interpret human life as marked from earlier history by an inexorable doom. These conceptions were reinforced by the Biblical insights of a Swiss Protestant, strongly grounded in an Old Tes-

tament full of divine anger and divine punishments. His version of life was essentially tragic, and happy endings were not his strong point. When, therefore, he prepared himself for grander perspectives, it was natural for him, though his characters remained uniformly peasants, to conceive his work in terms of a mountain myth. Naturally, not all of his work is a simple story of the life of a mountain village, from the first melting of the snows, through the brief summer to the descent of the long winter again: merely the story of a peasant's year. "L'amour du monde" is a social picture of a lakeside village; "Adam et Eve" the slow-moving story of a forsaken husband; "La vie de Samuel Belet" and "Jean-Luc persécuté", can as well be excluded from these "myths".

"La beauté sur la terre" (1927), and "Si le soleil ne revenait pas" (1937), are both examples of his symbolical novels which culminate only as problematic issues. It was undoubtedly with "La grande peur dans la montagne" (1926) that Ramuz triumphed over his earlier weaknesses to achieve a sublime mountain epic. The story relates the effects of an outbreak of foot-and-mouth disease among the herds high in the Alpine pastures. With the inevitable quarantine measures necessary, and the recollection of a former disaster, the author raises this type of documentary tale to tragic dimensions. There is rare artistry in the procedure by which Ramuz evokes the deathly silence of the pasture at night, and the evil presences that seemingly lurk in this world of rock and ice. When human resistance finally gives way to the natural terrors that were facing them, a huge avalanche of rock, ice and floodwater catapults down onto the village itself, and the mountain wreaks its vengeance on those who defied it—. . . "et jamais plus, depuis ce temps-là, on n'a entendu là-haut le bruit des sonnailles; . . . c'est la montagne a ses idées à elle, c'est que la montagne a ses volontés".

### Derborence

"Derborence" (1934), incomparably Ramuz's most powerful work, embodies this myth once more. To avoid any unnecessary misconception, the use of the myth by Ramuz must not be viewed as simply fantasy or fiction, for it incorporates in story form some part of humanity's deepest wisdom and experience. The setting to this novel is a high mountain pasture called Derborence, high above the Rhône valley within reach of Les Diablerets, where a sense of timelessness is primarily enhanced by the incessant strain of an inhuman silence and the stillness that pervades these mountain slopes. Of the twenty herdsmen there, only two have a presentiment of disaster. When it strikes, Derborence is blotted out and all that is left is a "wilderness of stone over which hangs a yellow pall of dust": the mountain, fickle and treacherous as ever, has claimed its own. There is only one survivor, who emerges

after two months has elapsed, and for whom time has ceased to exist. He crawls out of the rubble to return to it again supposedly in search of his wife (who failed on his return to recognise him), crazily armed with pick and shovel, to face 150 million cubic feet of earth! But his wife is the agent of his redemption, and succeeds in bringing him back to life and sanity. The very simplicity of the style, rugged and peasant-like in its rhythms, leaving so much unsaid, powerfully evokes the desperate tragedy of the whole event. And so the frailty of the woman, strong in the power of her love, overcomes the omnipotence of the mountain and brings back her husband once more from the dead — how reminiscent of Balzac's "Le Colonel Chabert", ". . . il sortit une seconde fois de la tombe".

### Summing up

This repetitive and cumulative style, resplendent of Ramuz's work, has, through its indirect suggestion and evocation, through its imposingly generalised observation of human types, certain merits of outstanding value that are and remain indisputable. As an ensemble, the language and syntax of his writings can often shock our refined tastes but, just as a nourishing bowl of hot "bouillon gras" can satisfy a ravenous hunger, so his undaunted originality serves to fascinate our other senses. Ramuz, who was never unaware of the classical French literatures, who sustained himself on Rousseau, Balzac, Maurice de Guérin, Claudel and Péguy, had long believed in using the *Vaudois* dialect, for he found it congenial and a more representative medium for coordinating his specialised studies. In a country where so many others abused the simple pulchitude and picturesque harmony of the local surroundings, Ramuz's originality was all the more striking. His own thoughts and aspirations were transposed and developed in his characters; he will remain, always and exclusively, the express image of the real "Vaudois"; "Les sommets de la mort endeuillaient la vallée? Sa fontaine en reflète un plus grand: la pensée".

(Geoffrey H. Buchler)

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