

IN VIEW OF SWISS NATURE

I recently recalled an encounter at Marous, a desert town in northern Cameroon, on the Chad border. One day near noon I met a young man at the cedar grove near the main street, where half of the town's population had sought refuge from the heat. The young man, whom I had first mistaken for a street vendor and tried to rid myself of, turned out to be a primary school teacher. He did not want to sell me anything, he wanted to know where I came from. I explained Switzerland in a nutshell: its state form, its climate, seasons, four national languages, history, wealth – and although I was concise, the young man seemed to get impatient. When I finally finished, he asked me the question that to him seemed the crux of the matter: *Et alors, vous étiez colonisés par qui?* (So then, who colonised you?)

I laughed about his simple-mindedness and hurried to make good use of my time and climb the Hossère, a hill outside the town. While climbing, watched by children who did not understand why someone would climb a mountain without needing to, I realized how legitimate this question was. Who had taught me that more was to be learned from mountains than from people? Could it be that my suspiciousness and my preference for nature were an echo of colonial thinking?

In 1779, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, the father

of all tourists, meticulously reported on geological and botanic facts in the letters he wrote from his Swiss journey. Filling many pages with detailed information on routes, rocky chasms, woodlands, and the weather, he provided a fine description of the landscape. Then suddenly, at Leukerbad, on 9 November 1779 he writes: "I observe that in my notes I make very little mention of human beings. Amid these grand objects of nature, they are but little worthy of notice, especially for someone who is only passing through." A day later, at Leuk, he finally brings himself to enter a house; however "when you enter...you are at once disgusted, for everything is dirty; want and hardship are everywhere apparent among these highly privileged and free burghers."

A little less than forty years later, the young Mary Shelley followed in his footsteps. As is known, the idea of Frankenstein came to her in Geneva, and it would be worth investigating if the local population served as a model for the monster. But this is a different story altogether. Just like Goethe, Mary Shelley indulges in descriptions of nature, and people are largely absent. "The Swiss then appeared to us – and our experience has strengthened this view – as a people of slow comprehension and sluggishness." This is all she mentions. When people do appear, they represent threats. About the passengers

of a *diligence*, a mail boat, she writes: "It would be easier for God to create man anew than to get these monsters clean."

It was not just writers and tourists who drew this specific image of the Swiss. The Helvetic Directorate, put into power by Napoleon (without doubt our coloniser) after the previous confederation had been abolished, asked the French supreme commander to refrain from retaliation against the rebels in Central Switzerland, for "they are savages whose enlightenment and civilisation we have made our task."

Perhaps this may account for the Swiss addiction to disappearing, which is reflected, amongst other places, in the writing of Robert Walser. He once commented to Carl Seelig that compared to nature we were all revealed as incompetent. The Swiss laws of banking confidentiality and the proverbial discretion of the Swiss in general may be an expression of the insight that before the beauty of nature we will inevitably be savages. Given this fact, it is better to call as little attention to ourselves as possible, to vanish in the landscape. Shame may be a reason not to join the European Union, although it may also be a consequence of continued mortification at the hands of tourists. Even after Goethe

and Shelley, no tourist ever visited our country in order to get to know its culture. No one is interested in Swiss history (least of all the Swiss themselves), Swiss cuisine, or Swiss music. To this day, this country is visited only for its nature. It is our true culture. However, people whose culture is nature are called savages. This is what we are ashamed of, as every servant is ashamed of the picture his master draws of him. And like every servant, we fear that this picture might contain the truth about us.

*Lukas Bärfuss,
is a Swiss writer (Hundert Tage, Wallstein Verlag, Göttingen)*