



**Federal President Frank-Walter Steinmeier  
on the presentation of the 2020 Ludwig Börne Prize  
to Christoph Ransmayr  
in Schloss Bellevue  
on 8 August 2021**

We are late, very late in fact – more than a year late! For today we are actually presenting the 2020 Ludwig Börne Prize. That is not exactly timely. But somehow, I thought this morning, quite apt, as it is being awarded to an author who is himself contemporary without quite being contemporary in his own special way.

Mr Ransmayr, although your literature is not usually set in the present, each of your works creates a new present. Your literary imagination passes effortlessly through the ages. Past and future become present in your writings. You thus shed a special light on our actual present, on our current lives, which are transformed, illuminated as well as rendered visible and comprehensible in an unprecedented and a new fashion during the time we devote to reading. You yourself wrote about the mystery of time, which is as perplexing and remote to us as the almost mythical Imperial China, in *Cox: or the Course of Time* – one of your loveliest books in my view. And in another work, you summed up the idea of the present always being our own subjective present when you wrote: “For a day cannot be more real than in the mind of someone who has experienced it.”

If we readers lose time with your books, if we lose ourselves to other and in other times, we gain new time, a new present. We gain clarity about ourselves, our circumstances, about our lives. We lose ourselves in other identities by engaging with your search for identity, by going with you to other times and to foreign worlds. We can thus come to a new understanding of our own identity – particularly by calling it into question.

You unlock our present, our daily lives, our set ideas about the world. You unlock us and take us with you on an adventure, whether it be in your reports or in your novels. And we see that many things are

very different to what we thought they were, that there is much to discover in other times and worlds. That enables us to think differently, to feel differently, to be different. We can see that there is always an alternative – and that produces a critical, reflective relationship with ourselves. That is adventure literature in the best sense. That is stating the exact time in the guise of being in a different one altogether.

“What has become of our adventures?” That is what you ask at the very start of your early novel *The Terrors of Ice and Darkness*. “What has become of our adventures – the ones that led us over icy passes, across great dunes, or often simply down highways? We could be seen making our way through mangrove forests, across prairies, windswept wastelands and glaciers, over oceans, passing on through cloudbanks, moving towards ever more remote destinations, external and internal.”

These opening lines, which almost sound like a Bruce Springsteen song, end with a warning that it is not easy to find adventure: “We could be seen making our way through mangrove forests, across prairies, windswept wastelands and glaciers, over oceans, passing on through cloudbanks, moving towards ever more remote destinations, external and internal. Let us not forget: The line of flight is only a line, not a road. From a physiognomic viewpoint, we are pedestrians and runners.”

In this book, you tell the fascinating story of the Imperial Austro-Hungarian North Pole Expedition, which sets off in 1872 and then, faced with immense hardship and the constant threat of a hostile environment, forever surrounded by the terrors of ice and darkness, discovers an unknown archipelago and names it Franz Joseph Land. At the same time, you tell the story of an Italian desperate for adventure, who tries to follow in the steps of this expedition one hundred years later, having familiarised himself with all the relevant documents and testimonies. He ultimately gets lost in the ice – an adventure which is blown away without a trace but made present and plucked from obscurity by your account.

This early novel seems to me to set out the themes of your literature. Foreign worlds, faraway times, an adventure which is described both in literary and documentary terms; and a follower is on his way, someone who is quite literally following in the steps of those who have gone before, someone who wants to see with his own eyes what this adventure meant – and what it means for him today. This also contributes to the success of your reports, on whose facts we can rely, in which, however, you yourself always become involved in what you see with your own eyes.

Later, in 2003, in a speech on Ernst Toller, you talked about yourself, something you rarely do: “If one of the most important effects of literature is fostering readers’ imagination [...] of happiness and suffering, of the life and death of an individual, thus potentially helping to create an at least theoretically conceivable immunity against

inhumanity based on ideology, racism or religion, which in reality simply reveals our own dogmas and clichéd views,” you say, “it is possibly of greater benefit [...] to read what authors have to say [...] about themselves, about scenes and moments in their lives.”

You thus describe the world, also foreign worlds and times, but you do not claim to describe them “objectively”. In search of the world, of the surprises and adventures it has to offer, you are always also seeking yourself, seeking new ways of seeing and being. And precisely because you become involved in your stories, you involve us – your readers.

You capture us – and subsequently release us with new and different eyes. Talking about your novel *The Last World*, Péter Esterházy once said, “At all events, we should read this book with caution. Otherwise, we could easily turn ourselves into fictional heroes”.

Anyone who reads your books becomes a little more themselves – just as you write of those taking part in the North Pole expedition, many of whom kept a diary: “Each man reported from his own world of ice”.

Expeditions to the North Pole are not an unusual subject in literature. Just think of Sten Nadolny’s wonderful *The Discovery of Slowness* about John Franklin’s expeditions. However, it is, I think, no coincidence that you chose the Imperial Austro-Hungarian expedition as the subject of your first novel. The very expedition which discovered what was at that time the last unknown corner of Earth, which left the imperial insignia there and gave its most remote parts fine-sounding names such as Tyrol Fjord, Cape Vienna, Hall Island or Hohenlohe Island. In the icy inhospitable north, an archipelago was named after the Habsburg Emperor of a decaying realm.

Julius Payer, the “Commander on land” of the expedition, died in August 1915 when, as you write, “the fields of Galicia were already blighted by a mound of mass graves, as were the fields of Flanders – and on the banks of Prussia’s Masurian lakes, in Alsace-Lorraine, Champagne, Serbia, the Caucasus or along the Isonzo dead men lie everywhere”.

In 1914, Emperor Franz Joseph addressed the manifesto of his declaration of war “To my peoples”. You quote that – and you will not deny feeling melancholic that these peoples have no longer been united as one since this war. The downfall of the old Europe had a much greater impact on Austria’s authors than on others because it marked the downfall of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy, the downfall of the multi-ethnic state.

The way I see it, Austrian authors such as Christoph Ransmayr carry within them this multicultural intellectual legacy when they write. They have evidently kept alive the flame of a utopia of the supranational, a longing for unity among very different peoples. It is thus hard for these

authors to accept borders because the Austrian house once contained so many different dwellings.

In an early article on the Austrian house from 1985, you describe a strange pilgrimage by a somewhat eccentric monarchist to the Empress Zita, who was still alive at that time and residing in her Liechtenstein "exile". Naturally, you take part in this trip. You write, evidently not without some emotion, of "Europe's last Empress, ruler of 53 million subjects – Germans, Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks, Italians, Poles, Ukrainians, Croats, Slovenes, Serbs, Bosnians, Romanians, as well as Turks, Huzulians, Greeks, Albanians and, of course, Jews – the consort of the King of Jerusalem and the Duke of Auschwitz! Amazing."

No one expressed the melancholy following the demise of the old Austria as powerfully as the holy drinker Joseph Roth, who, just like you, was both a very gifted reporter and a wonderful novelist. You include a quote from his novel *The Emperor's Tomb* at the beginning of your report: "Austria isn't a state, or a homeland, or a nation [...]. The clerics and the clerical idiots who are governing us now are making a so-called nation of us. Of us, a supra-nation, the only supra-nation the world has ever seen", wrote Joseph Roth in 1938.

That is it possible to be at home everywhere in a world marked by diversity, when one sees what makes people people and how they live their own lives and do not bother about arbitrary borders – that is the legacy of the Austrian house as conveyed by Joseph Roth – and it most likely also provides key impetus for your wanderings throughout the world. It is possible to put this in a different way, namely with the words of Ernst Toller. It is, I think, not by chance that you quoted him:

"If I were asked where I belonged I should answer that a Jewish mother had borne me, that Germany had nourished me, Europe had formed me, my home was the Earth, and the world my fatherland."

For me, Mr Ransmayr, you encapsulated these words most impressively in the colourful and so diverse stories in your volume *Atlas of an Anxious Man*. In these episodes, the reader really gets the impression that the world is your home, your fatherland. There is no bluster about multiculturalism here, no abstract philosophising about the transnational nature of human beings or other grand vocabulary.

You simply tell stories, stories about everyday life, which however we must be able to see as something special, as something worthy of being put in a book, as Thomas Mann would have said. In your early novel, you write that the North Pole researcher Weyprecht was all attention. That is also an apt way of describing you as an author: he was all attention. Whether these stories have a higher meaning, whether they portray adventure in everyday life or an episode which is erased like a drawing in the sand in the next wave: it is up to us, up to the

readers, to decide. You unfold a world for us and we have the privilege of waiting for each new page with anticipation.

Allow me to conclude by saying that you are receiving a prize named after Ludwig Börne. He was able to believe much more unconditionally in the Enlightenment and its benefits than we can today. The major wars unleashed by Germany, which destroyed the old Europe and brought terror and destruction to the world, have robbed us of our illusions. However, they could not take away our hope that in all the destruction, in the failures and in the desperate endeavours you describe, it is possible for life to be good, that it is worth the effort to live – and to see what the world has in store for us.

You would probably agree with Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher: "Everything in the world is strange and marvellous to well-open eyes".

In Atlas of an Anxious Man, each of your stories begins with a little "I saw ...". That sounds biblical, for that is how the visions of the end of the world begin in the Book of Revelation. Does that imply the sadness we feel because what we have just seen will soon disappear and be forgotten? Perhaps. But not necessarily.

This "I saw..." could, on the contrary, point not to the end but to the beginning. Perhaps I am stretching a point when I refer to the story of Creation: during six days of Creation it is said time and again about our newly created world: "And God saw that it was good." This world always begins anew when we open our eyes and see.

Am I stretching a point here? If so, I would have learned it from you: it is always worth the effort to go a bit further, to always go a bit too far – who knows what there is to see?