

## IN MEMORIAM

HUGO LOETSCHER (1929-2009)

"I would have loved to live one book longer." These were the last words of Hugo Loetscher, shortly before he passed away on August 18<sup>th</sup>. Loetscher, a close friend of Friedrich Dürrenmatt, died from the effects of a major heart surgery. On the night before his death, his latest work - *War meine Zeit meine Zeit* - had been published. It is a literary autobiography, beginning at the small Sihl river in the city of Zurich where he was born and meandering on a world journey over the Euphrates, Mekong and Amazon.

Loetscher was known as "the most cosmopolitan Swiss writer," a characterization generally linked to the famous quote of the main protagonist in his novel *Der Immune* (1975):

Am liebsten wäre er in alle Richtungen gegangen, und aus allen Richtungen zurückgekehrt, bis jeder fremde Ort ein vertrauter wurde, jeder vertraute sich einem fremden anlich und es keinen Unterschied mehr gab zwischen vertraut und unvertraut.

His many journeys brought Loetscher on several occasions to the United States. In 1979/80, he was writer in residence at USC; in 1981/82, Loetscher was the first holder of the *Swiss Chair* at the CUNY and in 2008, he was guest lecturer at UC Berkeley. The legacy of his visits is impressive. His lectures on Swiss literature(s) and identity(ies) at the CUNY Graduate School under the title *How Many Languages Does Man Need?* were published under the same title by Rolf Kieser and Tamara Evans. In much of his journalistic work, Loetscher focused on the US. His reports on Chicago, New York and California in particular were mostly published in the *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* and the *Tages Anzeiger*. Examples are: „Sgraffiti im New Yorker Untergrund“ (1973), „Zwei Inseln in Chicago“ (1974) and his series „Briefe von der nordamerikanischen Westküste,“ published in 1979 and 1980 the *Tages Anzeiger*. He was also one of the first German-speaking authors to pay attention to African-American and Chicano literatures, in „Die literarische Revolution der schwarzen Amerikaner“ (1973) and „Die Chicanos auf der Suche nach Aztlán“ (1980).

Loetscher often used journalistic work as *avant-texte* for his literature. "Besuch bei der Freiheit," a column in his anthology *Der Waschküchenschlüssel* (1983), presents a reflection on the conception of freedom in Swiss and American culture during a visit to the Statue of Liberty. A literary perspective on the United States can also be found under the title "From Coast to Coast," published in *The Dream Never Becomes Reality* (1995), a collection of essays by Swiss writers about the US. Loetscher's best-known literary work about American society is the novel *Herbst in der Großen Orange* (1982), a

reflection on the cultural and social identity of Southern California. The blurred boundaries between fake and reality are exemplified on the basis of a lawn:

Los Angeles, die ‚Grosse Orange‘ - lauter Schnitze um ein Nichts. In solchen Schnitzen hatte er seinen Herbst verbracht. Wie grün war dieser Herbst. (...) Zwei Grün hatte er. Eines, das man aussäte, und eines, das man per Meter von der Rolle kaufte. Einen Rasen, der von selber wuchs, mit so viel Chlorophyll, als sei er im Labor erzeugt worden. Und einen zweiten Rasen, den man aufklebte, von solch unregelmäßiger Struktur, als habe nicht eine Maschine, sondern der Zufall der Natur mitgewirkt. Lagen die beiden im Freien nebeneinander, war nicht auszumachen, für welchen er den Mäher brauchte und für welchen das Fleckenwasser.

*Herbst in der Großen Orange* also brings up a topic Loetscher had been fascinated about ever since his encounter with Brazil in 1965: mass emigration and the formation of a new multicultural identity in the Americas:

All diese Wurzelträger genierten sich nicht, weil sie Kontinente und Länder hinter sich gelassen hatten. Sie machten nicht auf ewige Natur, als hätten sie hier schon immer ihre Wurzeln gehabt. (...) Nicht einmal das Unkraut stammte von hier. (...) Bäume, die man importiert hatte, und Büsche, die umgesiedelt worden waren, Verpflanzte, Emigranten und Eingewanderte; sie machten es möglich, dass dieser Herbst grün war, wie bisher keiner.

In the last two decades, topics such as emigration, globalization and multiculturalism became constituent elements of his work. Unfortunately, this fascinating reflection on cultural identity in a globalizing world has been given much less attention than his writings on Switzerland. Whereas in France, he was honored on several occasions and *Le Figaro* even referred to him as “a writer of European importance,” Loetscher was primarily known in Germany for his columns on his country of origin. Most famously, in his short stories “Wenn der Liebe Gott Schweizer wäre” and “Der Waschküchenschlüssel,” Loetscher managed to capture the very essence of Swiss mentality. In this context, we should also mention “Die Entdeckung der Schweiz,” a post-colonial variant of Montesquieu’s *lettres persanes*, where Switzerland is “discovered” by a group of Indians, canoeing up the Rhine in search for gold. An important contribution to the study of German-Swiss literature is his collection of essays, compiled under the ironic title *Lesen statt klettern* in 2003. Instead of telling the history of Swiss literature according to tradition, Loetscher deliberately decided not to begin with Albrecht von Haller but rather with the humanist Thomas Platter, who instead of glorifying the mountains in his native Valais, went in search for *Bildung*, which he eventually found in the city of Basel. By beginning the history of Swiss literature in the city rather than in the mountains, Loetscher clearly distanced himself from the dominantly Alpine perspective on Swiss culture.

It would, however, be unfair to reduce Loetscher to a specifically Swiss writer. His first novel *Abwässer* (1963), for instance, represents a remarkable exception in the German literature of the 1960s. In a reaction to the simplistic rhetoric of an alternative, "clean" society, Loetscher presented the story of a sewer worker, who illuminates the new rulers of an unidentified republic about the importance of the sewer system: Whoever rules the country, there will always remain dirty water. In 2000, the Italian writer Massimo Raffaeli considered *Abwässer* the most revolutionary German novel of the 1960s. Whereas for obvious reasons the central message of *Abwässer* was not welcomed in the GDR, Loetscher also distanced himself from the capitalist rhetoric of the FRG in his novel *Noah* (1967). The building of the Ark is not understood as a warning of inherent doom, but perceived as the source of an economic boom. When the boom collapses and former allies turn against each-other, Noah comes to the conclusion that there is only one solution left for this world: to let it rain. The references in this novel to the *Wirtschaftswunder* are more than obvious; interestingly, *Noah* was rediscovered at the turn of the century in Eastern Europe, where it became a bestseller in Russian (2000) and Polish (2004) translation. Only recently, the English translation of 1970 was newly interpreted by the Indian writer Gowri Ramnarayan, who used its message as a metaphor of how global warming is not understood as a tragedy but rather misinterpreted as an excellent business opportunity.

Loetscher's main contribution to German literature is undoubtedly his novel *Der Immune*. Written in 1975, it was originally discussed as just another literary autobiography. Whereas most journalists and scholars would take pleasure in identifying the "real" person behind each character, it was the French translation of 1989 that under the title *Le déserteur engagé* paved the path for new, much more fascinating interpretation, with links to the *nouveau roman* and the work of Bakhtin. In 2005, the Indian Germanist Anil Bhatti presented a post-colonial study of the novel, whereas others would read *Der Immune* in connection to globalization and post-modernist literary theories. The similarities with Rüdiger Safranski's bestseller *Wieviel Globalisierung verträgt der Mensch?* (2003) are, in fact, notorious. A case in point is the moment when the main protagonist of the novel decides to immunize himself:

Hätte er voll und ganz mitempfunden an dem, was an einem einzigen Tag auf dieser Welt geschah, er hätte am Abend an seinen Gefühlen sterben müssen. Und hätte er versucht, zu verstehen, was an diesem einen Tag geschah, er hätte am gleichen Abend verrückt sein müssen. (...) Er begann sich in dem Maße zu immunisieren, als er die Fähigkeit bewahren wollte, zu empfinden und zu agieren.

Anticipating Roland Robertson's notion of "glocalization," *Der Immune* interweaves local and global perceptions into a new conception of reality. By doing so, it deliberately deconstructs traditional approaches to identity:

Wenn (der Immune) jemanden vom Menschen und seinen Wurzeln reden hörte, konnte er aufspringen und ihn bitten, die Schuhe auszuziehen, er möchte einmal einen sehen, der statt Füßen Wurzeln hat. Ja, wir wollten nicht mit Wurzeln, sondern mit Füßen leben.

Hugo Loetscher's private papers will go to the Swiss Literary Archives in Bern. His rich collection of Swiss literature has been donated to the UC Berkeley Main Library. He himself will rest in the Sihlfeld cemetery in Zurich, in a grave next to Gottfried Keller.

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