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Zurich as a gateway to the world

With his productive literary stays in Paris, Portugal, Brazil and Los Angeles, Hugo Loetscher was the only genuine global author of his generation.

CHARLES LINSMAYER

He actually wanted to become a missionary. The Catholic working-class family from Zurich into which Hugo Loetscher was born on 22 December 1929 originated in Escholzmatt in Lucerne, a region where, as he later once wrote, “the women have the body temperature of a cow and it is customary for them to lose their maidenhood in a barn”. However, this second-generation ‘immigrant’ in Zurich did not become a farmer or a missionary. Instead, from the working-class district of Aussersihl, he went on to grammar school and university and then conquered sophisticated Zurich, which regarded him right through to his later volume of essays “Lesen statt Klettern” as a brilliant novelist and essayist with a penchant for the grotesque and self-irony.

This style is evident even in his first novel “Abwässer” from 1963, in which he carries out a kind of exorcism with Zurich. Condensed into an anonymous Kafkaesque system, the city becomes a place of ideological posturing which has long since lost any relation to elementary reality. If “Abwässer” is an ecological book ahead of its time, “Die Kranzflechterin” from 1964, an unsentimental portrayal of a working-class woman from Zurich, anticipates key elements of female emancipation literature. “Noah” in 1967 turns euphoria over prosperity into the flood, and “Der Immune” from 1975 shows – through the example of the main protagonist – what immunisation strategies an enlightened intellectual had to develop to come through the second third of the 20th century unscathed.

“I have no roots”

When asked where his roots lay, Loetscher remarked: “I have no roots. I have feet to walk away.” This means that he always saw home as the base and point of departure to set off from into the world. His stay in Paris in 1950/51 where he studied Valéry, Gide, Sartre, Camus, but also Zola and Voltaire as a doctoral student had a major influence. “France awoke my sensibilities,” he noted in 1963, and the Parisian school was evident in the elegant, sophisticated writer with the mandatory cigarette right to the end.

Via Portugal, where he became a persona non grata after a film about the dictator Salazar, in 1965 he reached Brazil which became his true great love and which he vis-

ited 13 times in total for long and short stays. Here, he also produced the reportages that are still relevant today, which were published in 2016 in the posthumous volume “Das Entdecken erfinden”. He found inspiration for books such as the 1979 novella “Wunderwelt” in which a little girl found dead is given the gift of a life not lived through literary means. Loetscher had a strong interest in poor, working-class and rural Brazil and much less in the glitz of Rio de Janeiro. However, he created a monument to an urban metropolis with another text in the giddy America novel “Herbst in der Grossen Orange” produced during his time as a poetics lecturer in Los Angeles in 1979/80. “War meine Zeit meine Zeit” was published a few days after his death on 18 August 2009. This is a book in which Loetscher recounts his life on the rivers of the world in eloquent, virtuoso fashion, once again powerfully documenting the brilliant way in which the much-travelled Swiss was the only genuine global author of his generation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: Hugo Loetscher’s works are available in German from Diogenes, Zurich.

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Photo: Yvonne Böhrer

“I lived in an age when one became aware that we would have to ensure we had enough air to breathe. The climate is not something that simply exists but is instead determined by us. I learned about the gastric-brooding frog when it died out, and I am apparently partly responsible for whether rhinos live in the rivers in Sumatra... Am I as a prehistorian to become a co-creator of a world that we are creating by saving it?”
(Taken from “War meine Zeit meine Zeit”, Diogenes, Zurich 2009)