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Yearning for Japan, a country of nostalgia

When lecturing at a Japanese university, Adolf Muschg wrote his first novel “Im Sommer des Hasen” and could never shake off the hold Japan and its culture had on him.

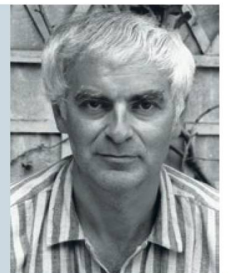
CHARLES LINSMAYER

It was “the discovery of a continent” that the puritanical Swiss was pursuing with Yoko, the Japanese theology student, and he discovered things he did not know in wild nights and passionate embraces: “the profoundly visible unity when his skin came together with the foreign body”. Wilfried Buser is the name of the Swiss author who like five others had to write an article about Japan for the anniversary publication of a Swiss company and was introduced to physical love in all of its delightfulness and excess in a world that was still unfamiliar to him.

The story comes from a novel which itself also goes back to a visit to Japan. From 1962 to 1964, the Swiss author Adolf Muschg, who was born in 1934, was a lecturer in German at the International Christian University of Tokyo. And it was this trip and the love story experienced there that inspired the novel “Im Sommer des Hasen”, which marked the start in 1965 of a literary career that spanned novels such as “Gegenzauber”, “Albissers Grund”, “Das Licht und der Schlüssel”, “Der Rote Ritter”, “Eikan, du bist spät” and “Löwenstern” and extended to the novella “Der weisse Freitag” in 2017, making it one of the most significant in German literature. With “Hansi und Ume”, the book about Japan by his aunt Elsa Muschg, Japan became a place he longed for as a ten-year-old and it never relinquished its hold on him, eventually fulfilling the dream he had from the beginning – that he would “find himself” there. Zerutt, Albisser’s adversary in the novel named after him, is a Zen master, and in 1985 Muschg spent four weeks at a Zen monastery near Kyoto. When “Im Sommer des Hasen” was turned into a film in 1986, he fell in love with Atsuko Kanto on set who became his third wife in 1991, also giving him family ties with Japan. This country and a spiritual and mystical experience have since pervaded his work in many ways. Not just in books set in Japan, like the novel “Eikan, du bist spät”, in which a European experiences liberation and enlightenment after meeting the Japanese Zen monk Eikan, but also in less obvious ones. After the publication of his narrative masterpiece, the Perceval novel “Der Rote Ritter”, for which he received the Büchner Prize, the greatest accolade in German literature, he revealed that he would never have written the novel without the three Zen masters Suzuki Taisetsu, Hisamatsu Shin-ichi and Harrada

Sekkei. Muschg has nevertheless also built bridges between Japan and Europe by establishing a relationship between Japanese mysticism and that of Angelus Silesius, Meister Eckhart and Jakob Böhme. Through a theological and literary exploration he continued the work of his half-brother Walter Muschg, who died in 1965 but had previously carried out research into “mysticism in Switzerland” in 1935. “Im Sommer des Hasen” was initially to be published by the Walter-Verlag in Olten. However, the Yoko episode of all things was deemed indecent by the Catholic owner of the publishing house, which meant that the book was eventually published by the Arche-Verlag owned by Peter Schifferli who was captivated by its sensuality.

BIBLIOGRAPHY: “Im Sommer des Hasen” is available in paperback from Suhrkamp.



“I discovered in the monastery that life can be at one with itself and with its apparent opposite, death. And that if you regard everything as equally valid, then you are indifferent to nothing. That is more than I had previously learned in politics or in literature, through dialogue or in love. Do you have to live in a Zen monastery to discover that? It was necessary for me: as a way of learning that the obvious is difficult but possible.” (“Aussteigen? Einsteigen!”, in the “Frankfurter Rundschau”, 24/08/1985)

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