

1-1-2009

Hugo Loetscher

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Recommended Citation

Romey Sabalius. "Hugo Loetscher" *The Literary Encyclopedia and Literary Dictionary* (2009).

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Hugo Loetscher (1929-2009)

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Essayist; Novelist; Poet; Travel writer.

Active 1960-2009 in Switzerland

The Swiss writer Hugo Loetscher was born on 22 December 1929 into a working class family in Zurich. After studying political science, sociology, history of economics, and literature in Zurich and Paris, he worked as a journalist and editor for various prominent Swiss newspapers and magazines. Having debuted as an author in the 1960s, he is one of the leading writers of the generation after Max Frisch. Hugo Loetscher died on 18 August 2009 in Zürich. His last words were: "I would have liked to live for one more book." He and Friedrich Dürrenmatt and is considered one of the foremost Swiss intellectuals and critics of his time. Being recognized in academic circles internationally as well, Loetscher was writer-in-residence at various universities in Europe and overseas, such as the University of Porto, the University of Southern California, the City University of New York, and the University of Munich, and his lectures at the latter two have been published (*How Many Languages Does Man Need?* [1982] and *Vom Erzählen erzählen* [*Narrating About Narration*, 1988]).

Loetscher's first novel, entitled *Abwässer* [*Sewage*, 1963], is an examination of life in an anonymous, yet noticeably Swiss city from the unusual vantage point of the director of the local sewage system. This literally subversive, yet strictly realistic glance from the underground reveals that the supposedly "clean" society has to deal with its fair share of dirty laundry, hidden from public view. Loetscher's poignant social criticism and his elaborate style, rich in metaphors, irony, and the use of the inherent double meaning of language, earned him critical acclaim and his first literary prize. Only one year later, he published his next novel, *Die Kranzflechterin* [*The Wreath Weaver*, 1964]. In this book, he illustrates the life of an immigrant woman from Germany in the working-class quarters of Zurich in the first half of the twentieth century. The plot line, which is loosely based on the life of his own grandmother, contrasts the glamour of the wealthy Swiss metropolis with the blight and the harsh conditions in its poorer neighborhoods where the heroine ekes out her modest living by weaving wreaths for the deceased, considering it a dead-sure business. Loetscher's next novel, *Noah* [*Noah*, 1967], is a parable that looks at the flip side of an economic boom in a fictitious Mesopotamian location while reflecting contemporary Western society. The biblical protagonist builds an ark because he sees the hypocrisy and decadence that accompanies the newly gained prosperity, and he anticipates that soon it will rain on the parade.

In addition to his first three novels, in which Loetscher critically exposes the shortcomings of a modern European society – explicitly or implicitly Swiss –, he also published two books on Latin America. *Zehn Jahre Fidel Castro* [*Ten Years Fidel Castro*, 1969] analyzes the first decade of the Cuban revolution. Although Loetscher shows sympathy for the desired political change and the attempt to create a just society, he refrains from an enthusiastic and overly optimistic solidarity, which was quite common among European intellectuals at

the end of the 1960s. While the course of history has outpaced the Castro book's relevance, Loetscher's volume on the Portuguese Jesuit priest António Vieira is a timeless account of another man's vision to create a more egalitarian community. The book *Die Predigt des heiligen Antonius an die Fische* [*Saint Anthony's Sermon to the Fish*, 1966] (later re-released under the title *António Vieira – Portrait eines Gewissens* [*António Vieira – Portrait of a Conscience*]) contains the priest's sermon from 1654 and a very extensive foreword by the editor Hugo Loetscher. In this essay, which can be regarded as the author's own literary credo, Loetscher praises the style and clarity of Vieira's sermons, which are poignant and eloquent in addressing the influential power brokers of colonial Brazil. At the same time, they are simple and lucid and hence comprehensible to the uneducated peasants and natives as well. Loetscher sees Vieira's sermons as prototypical examples of how ethics are reflected in aesthetics, and he too tries to write literature that is *behaftbar* (responsible, liable), a notion that writers should not only be liable for the *content* of their works, but also for their *form of delivery*, which must be appropriate to the cause.

Style is indeed an essential component in what can be considered Loetscher's greatest work, the novel *Der Immune* [*Man with Immunity*, 1975] (a slightly revised edition appeared in 1985). Loetscher realizes that people are not one-dimensional and that they behave and talk differently depending on the given social context. Therefore, he tries to provide his partially autobiographical protagonist with multiple characters and various voices. Consequently, the many chapters of this book feature different narration techniques and various forms of speech, without an artificial unity of character and style. As a result, this post-modern novel expresses the complexity and simultaneity of modern man in a variety of social roles and life situations. Eleven years later, Loetscher published a sequel to this successful novel, entitled *Die Papiere des Immunen* [*Notes by the Man with Immunity*, 1986], in which the author explores additional possibilities for his protagonist. He illustrates what could have happened in his life had it taken a different course or had he lived in a different time and place. Hence, the protagonist wanders through history and across continents to realize several alternatives to his actual existence. Unlike so many authors of that time who sent their protagonists on a quest to discover their authentic identity, Loetscher refrains from restricting his protagonist to one role, and self-discovery is the realization and acceptance of the complexity of a person's many facets.

While the first three novels focused on European society and the author's home country, and the “man with immunity” wandered from Zurich to other European locations and eventually across the globe, Loetscher also wrote two novels that are situated entirely abroad. In his book *Wunderwelt* [*Miracle World*, 1979], the author continues to apply his method of multiple styles and the exploration of various possibilities. After witnessing a funeral for a young girl in Brazil's poverty-stricken northeastern provinces (the Sertão), the narrator imagines how her life could have been, and he describes to her the wonders and challenges of her own country that she did not have the chance to experience. In this book as well, the multitude of styles attempts to reflect the complexity and variety of the country, and Loetscher applies various genres such as ballads, sermons, pamphlets, administrative language, etc., that are prominent components of Brazilian society and culture. Like in *Der Immune*, Loetscher's denunciation of an unjust society and deplorable living conditions is not expressed in an ostentatious and overt critique of capitalism with slogans of the post-1968 generation, but through the mere depiction of everyday situations where the happiness or misery speak for itself, while the macro-economic connections are illustrated in the arrangement of the chapters that jump from countryside to metropolis, from modest straw huts to glitzy CEO offices, from pilgrimage places to Cachaça cantinas. Like in his previous novels, the alternative and sometimes unusual narrative vantage points shed a different and often sobering light on aspects that are usually taken for granted and not consciously reflected upon.

While the protagonist in the *Immune* volumes finds himself at various crossroads in life, the 50-year-old H. in the novel *Herbst in der Grossen Orange* [*Fall in the Big Orange*, 1982] apparently reaches the end of the road. Fall is the central metaphor in this book full of symbolism and clever associations: it is the season in which the protagonist spends time in Los Angeles (Hugo Loetscher was Swiss Writer-in-Residence at the University of Southern California in 1979), it represents H.'s first stages of aging and the growing awareness of his mortality,

and it marks the end of Western civilization. The Pacific Rim location of Los Angeles – where the continental westward expansion came to a halt –, the various catastrophic threats that the metropolis faces, and the artificiality of American life with plastic lawns, billboard skies, Disneyland, and Hollywood, lead the author to believe that the twentieth century dominance of the United States will come to an end, because its society only lives on borrowed time and sustains itself on inauthentic surrogates and illusions. Yet, H.'s eschatological visions throughout the book are balanced with his excitement for the heterogeneity of this multicultural society and are concluded with an optimistic glance across the ocean, where presumably new worlds arise further west in the Far East.

After venturing through time and space in his last four novels, Loetscher tries to explore the animal soul, albeit not the animal kingdom, since the creatures in his 34 non-traditional fables of the book *Die Fliege und die Suppe* [*The Fly and the Soup*, 1989] exist in an environment controlled by humans. Unlike the traditional genre, his stories do not conclude with a moral. Instead, the sum of the various descriptions of the unnatural situations in which the animals find themselves sheds a light on the human(e) condition of our society. Loetscher pursued this theme with his encyclopedic essay *Der predigende Hahn* [*The Preaching Rooster*, 1992], in which he explores the many roles animals have assumed in world literature and global cultural traditions.

In his next novel *Saison* [*Season*, 1995], Loetscher returns to familiar territory. From the vantage point of a lifeguard in a Swiss public swimming pool, the author examines the frailties and oddities of his compatriots once again. The observation of society in a bathing suit is both literally and figuratively revealing, and humorously presented through the lifeguard's witty commentary. Yet this spirited narration lacks the seriousness and depth of Loetscher's earlier works. His latest novel to date, *Die Augen des Mandarin* [*The Eyes of the Mandarin*, 1999], again takes the reader from Switzerland across the globe and through many cultures and is characteristic for Loetscher's wandering between the familiar and the foreign, the merging and mixing of the various cultures, the estrangement of the customary, and the focus on the common aspects in foreign elements. These universal ruminations of the protagonist – who worked in the cultural sector – at the end of his career, the end of his life, and the end of the century can be considered as highly stylized memoirs of a truly cosmopolitan *Weltbürger* (citizen of the world).

Loetscher also published collections of shorter prose. *Der Waschküchenschlüssel* [*The Laundry Room Key*, 1983] satirizes Swiss customs and attitudes, especially the popular notion of being special and unique in this world. *Der Buckel* [*The Hunchback*, 2002] collects tragicomical stories from 1963 to 1998 that are subtle, yet gripping in their analysis of human misery. A third volume entitled *War meine Zeit meine Zeit* [*Were My Times My Time*, 2009] contains observations and anecdotes to which the author refers as his “late prose”. Loetscher's repeated attempts to gain acclaim in the theater with his plays *Schichtwechsel* [*Change of Shift*, 1960] and *Die Launen des Glücks* [*The Vagaries of Fortune*, 1997] as well as his volume of poetry *Es war einmal die Welt* [*Once there was the World*, 2004] did not elicit much approval among critics. Regardless, he is considered one of the most influential contemporary Swiss novelists – firmly rooted in the humanist tradition of the Enlightenment –, a keen chronicler of Swiss society and intellectual life, and an engaged cosmopolitan wanderer across social classes and cultures worldwide. Hugo Loetscher died on 18 August 2009 in Zürich. His last words were: “I would have liked to live for one more book.”

Citation: Sabalius, Romey. "Hugo Loetscher". *The Literary Encyclopedia*. 18 May 2009. [http://www.litencyc.com/php/people.php?rec=true&UID=12470, accessed 11 November 2013.]

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