

On the death of literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki (1920-2013): A passionate advocate of literature—Part 2

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1 November 2013

This is the second part of a two-part tribute to the Polish-born, German literary critic Marcel Reich-Ranicki, who died September 18. Part 1 was posted October 31.

Literary criticism as enlightenment

Marcel Reich-Ranicki's criticism was often sharp and witty. Not for nothing was he able to publish a collection of his reviews in 1984 under the title *Nothing but Scathing Criticisms [or Drubbings] (Lauter Verrisse)*, which sold very well.

Reich-Ranicki included an essay in that volume dealing with the history, significance and tasks of literary criticism. Following on from the Enlightenment figures of the 18th century, he argues and demonstrates, using such classic figures of literary criticism as Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, the Romantic Friedrich Schlegel and writer Theodor Fontane, why negative commentary must be a necessary component of criticism. It means, above all, treating literature seriously.

He disassociates himself from the "German-philistine departure from public life" following the failed revolution of 1848 and the "cult of feeling": "Where one loves the twilight and the mysterious more than clarity and sobriety, where one trusts conspiracy more than analysis, where one appreciates the thinker above all when they write poetry, and poets when they do not think, and where, on the other hand, one has a persistent weakness for the abstruse and confused, for the profound, or more correctly, for the seemingly profound, then, indeed, there can be no room for criticism. Since it must appear as a nuisance and inappropriate." [9]

For Reich-Ranicki, there was no contradiction between the enlightening effect of literature or poetry and its poetic content. Poetry and thinking, both were essential for him, in the lyrical and the prosaic. He never tired of asking both from authors and their works. And for this reason, he so loved the poet Heinrich Heine. Moral or political tracts that pretended to be stories or novels were anathema to him.

In *Verrisse* one comes across fierce condemnation of works whose authors he fundamentally values. He always regretted East German writer Anna Seghers' capitulation to the demands of the Stalinist cultural bureaucracy. He discussed her novel *Tust* (1968) under the headline *The Bankruptcy of a Narrator*. [10]

An unsuccessful play by Peter Weiss

Although it is hardly possible to treat all the essays in *Verrisse* in detail, one critique should be highlighted. German playwright Peter Weiss (*Marat/Sade, The Investigation*) is one of the writers whose merits Reich-Ranicki acknowledges elsewhere, and whose play *Trotsky in Exile* (1969) he analyses.

He had seen the piece at the Düsseldorf Schauspielhaus in a conventional performance, and begins his review with the sentence: "What happened here seems distasteful and obscene to me". He then describes those sitting in the audience, "typical representatives" of the affluent bourgeois society, "apparently wealthy Düsseldorfers, for whom, of course, the last thing they want is communist rule in the Rhine and Ruhr", and who react seemingly with indifference to the content of the play.

The work marked Weiss' response, who believed in socialism and the possibility of reforming Soviet rule, to the entry of the Red Army into Prague in 1968 and his rejection of Stalinist methods. For example, he has Trotsky say in the piece: "What has happened does not prove the falsity of socialism, but the frailty, the inexperience of our revolutionary action". [11]

Although Reich-Ranicki welcomes Weiss' new, critical attitude towards Stalinism, he has almost nothing good to say about the play: "Since, however, *Trotsky in Exile* is little more than the new insight of Peter Weiss, but a not a very original insight into the nature of Stalinism, and since it seems to be composed mostly of editorial comments, one wonders whether it would not have been more practical and reasonable to simply write an article. Why all the complicated and sophisticated stagecraft, including the use of many actors, costumes and props, if no more comes out of it?" [12]

Reich-Ranicki is critical of the fact that "the audience member who does not know the history of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union" becomes rapidly lost "in a mess of completely or partially unintelligible utterances, allusions and incidents". "The audience member, however, who has read the writings of Lenin and Trotsky, for whom names like Radek, Plekhanov and Bukharin (they all appear here) mean much, is taken aback by the shallowness of the author Weiss and his, to say the least, annoying negligence." [13]

He points out that the playwright absurdly feels he has sufficiently dealt with the policy of Stalinist "socialist realism" in this play. At most, the drama reminded him of "a minor character in this picture", Stalin. "There, he was God incarnate all powerful and magnificent, here he is a ridiculous clown, if not a cretin. The method therefore remains the same, only the signs are switched". [14] Such an approach makes any serious discussion impossible and harms political theatre, according to Reich-Ranicki.

For Reich-Ranicki, Trotsky merits a different presentation: "Even worse, and even more annoying: Trotsky, one of the ablest political

writers of the century, who had for some time been able to achieve a synthesis of philosophical ideas and revolutionary action, whose highly dramatic—and I do not exaggerate—adventurous life is like a unique parable, this man is degraded by Weiss into a leaden, boring windbag, who often gives the impression of being a narrow-minded and stupid functionary.” [15]

Later, he added a volume called *Nothing but Praise* [or *Eulogies*] (*Lauter Lobreden*), in which he brings together his more positive reviews, but it did not prove as popular as *Verrisse*. *Lobreden* contains not only essays on the occasion of prizes awarded to living authors, but also tributes to those who are deceased. His appreciation of Ricarda Huch stands out. Huch was one of the great female writers of the first half of the 20th century, who is rarely still read, even though she was celebrated by Thomas Mann as “‘supreme in the arena of the conscious’, as a great intellectual.” [16]

Thomas Mann and Heinrich Heine as literary benchmarks

Reich-Ranicki’s conception of literature was anything but elitist or elevated. Nevertheless, he was very demanding. The fundamental benchmarks for him were authors such as Heine, Mann, Fontane, Franz Kafka and the beloved German classics he read in his youth.

Following the above-quoted passages [in Part 1] from his book on Heine, he writes: “When I think about whether there was another author who stands as close to me as Heine, and of whom I could say, he helped me in the most difficult situations in my life, he changed me—then only one comes to mind: Thomas Mann”. In his autobiography, he admits that “Thomas Mann impressed and influenced, perhaps dominated me like no other German writer”. [17] *Thomas Mann and His Family*, as the title indicates, was dedicated to the writer and his family members.

In fact, there is a good deal in Reich-Ranicki’s writings that reminds one of the bite and sharpness with which Heine judged his literary contemporaries and the encyclopedic erudition and precision of Mann’s presentation, even if his style was usually much simpler.

Because even when Reich-Ranicki polarized, and in all that he found to condemn, called a spade a spade, he saw himself always as the advocate for literature, as an agent and friend, especially of the reader, but also the author. His criticism was generally well-founded, based on knowledge and brilliantly formulated. The Austrian writer and 2004 Nobel Prize winner Elfriede Jelinek, whose literary talent Reich-Ranicki had questioned, confessed that he formulated his demolitions so amusingly they were a pleasure to read.

After a violent feud with Reich-Ranicki, author Martin Walser wrote the novel *Death of a Critic* (2002), whose title character was supposedly inspired by the former. Walser has written a worthy obituary regarding Reich-Ranicki’s significance in *Die Zeit*, the newsweekly: “He could rely on his quick-wittedness, but gladly followed up his flashes of insight with more considered words. Although he could say anything pointedly, he then also demanded of himself the proof. For this, every cultural tradition was available to him.”

The sharp dispute between Reich-Ranicki and Walser stemmed from the latter’s speech in Frankfurt in 1998, in which he declared that Auschwitz was not suited “to become a routine threat, a means of intimidation to be deployed at any time, or a moral club, or even just a compulsory exercise”. Reich-Ranicki was not the only one who understood the writer to be suggesting that there was an “expiry date” for Germany’s confrontation with its past, which Walser denies to this day.

Reich-Ranicki dealt with this debate in his autobiography, in the chapter “End of the Honeymoon”. [18] It deals with the dispute that erupted in

1986 after the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (FAZ) published a speech by the historian Ernst Nolte, seeking to relativize the mass murder of Jews with reference to other mass murders in history, especially in the Soviet Union, and justifying the crimes of the Nazis as self-defence against Bolshevism. This put an end to Reich-Ranicki’s relationship with FAZ editor Joachim Fest. They did not speak for years.

His role as an advocate for literature, and his desire to present this before a wide audience, brought Reich-Ranicki to use a medium about which he was generally quite critical: television. In his ZDF program, *The Literary Quartet*, he discussed new works, often very controversially, together with Helmuth Karasek and Sigrid Löffler (later Iris Radisch) and making the works known to readers curious to form their own judgment.

Through his vivid, almost dramatic presentations, he imparted to the general public the idea that literature can not only “educate”, but can also be highly entertaining. However, when he was to be awarded an award for his television work, he was so repelled by the absurd, superficial entertainment that more and more dominated this event and the channel’s programs, that he rejected it outright.

All this made Reich-Ranicki a personality with whom the ruling political and media circles sought to adorn themselves to bolster their moral integrity. He was allowed, for example, to deliver the 2012 speech on Holocaust Remembrance Day in the *Bundestag* [parliament]. At a time when German soldiers were once again participating in international wars and democratic rights were under fierce assault, his appearance was aimed at demonstrating that modern Germany was quite different than the one that had persecuted him and despatched his parents to the gas chambers.

Notes

[9] Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Lauter Verrisse* [Stuttgart 1984], 29

[10] Ibid., 46-49

[11] Ibid., 98f

[12] Ibid., 99

[13] Ibid., 100

[14] Ibid., 101

[15] Ibid., 100

[16] Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Lauter Lobreden* [Stuttgart 1985], 26

[17] Marcel Reich-Ranicki, *Mein Leben* [Stuttgart 1999], 507

[18] Ibid., 540-551

Concluded



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