

Nichts als Literatur

Aufstse und Anmerkungen

M. Reich-Ranicki

February 1-4, 2006

A small yellow Reclam, with a black and white cut-out of the author on the cover, looking very grim. A collection of short essays written during the twenty-year period between 1962 and 1982 mostly published in either die Zeit or FAZ. Reich-Ranicki is a critic, and as a critic his legitimacy is always in question, especially in a tradition like the German, which may recognise the individual critic, but not criticism as an institution or an honorable 'Beruf'. Thus most of the criticism that can be found in the regular papers (as opposed to academic journals) is written by other writers, journalists, publishers or translators. People who write criticism as something additional to their real activities. The situation is not good, especially when a fellow writer is asked to review a work of a rival. Either he puts it down, and exposes himself to the charge of petty revenge, or he is appreciative and is suspected of back-scratching expecting to be reciprocated. A professional critic though, should be able to remain above such suspicions, writing with the realization that with every word he produces, his reputation is at stake, and thus by extension also his livelihood. The reason for this incestual state in literature is obvious. A painter, an actor, a director or even a musician, are not expected to be reviewed by painters, actors, directors or fellow musicians; but surely only a writer can by definition write on writing.

But is criticism so important? Is it not something at best superflous at worst misleading and destructive? Reich-Ranicki refers to his experiences with Gruppe 47, that literary group that came to define postwar German literature, and which was in existence for twenty years under the auspices of Hans Werner Richter. Its meetings, that usually lasted for three days, took place all over the country¹ consisted in readings, which were then directly judged by invited critics. Reich-Ranicki explains that the situation was not conducive to fair appraisals. Unlike the case of a poem, which can be read in extenso, a section of a longer work does never do full justice to the work as a whole. And no matter what, the reception of a literary work read out aloud by its author depends so much on extra-literary devices, like tone of voice, phrasing and emphasis. Many writers are very poor readers, often swallowing entire words or reading in such a luck-lustre way as to induce boredom. In addition, unlike when reading a text, a critic cannot go back, as soon as he gets bogged down in a detail, he risks missing what follows. Nevertheless compromises have to be made, and the critic presents his spontaneous comments, not as the final say of a sole judge, but as a contribution to a judgement, the idea being that

¹ Occasionally outside as well. In 1965, close to its end, it took place in Sigtuna, and in 1968 it was planned to take place in Prague, but the Soviet invasion prevented this, and incidentally it thus indirectly (as well as unintentionally) also provoked the petering out of the group.

the various prejudices and misunderstandings will somehow even out when emerging not from an individual but from a collective. In fact the whole game, obvious as its draw-backs are, turn out to be something congenial to the temperament of Reich-Ranicki, who later in the 70's repeatedly sat on the jury of the Ingrid Bachmann prize.

As a critic Reich-Ranicki has chosen to be a journalist, preferring to write to the general public on whose interest and motivation he cannot count, but which he on the contrary has to awaken, stimulate and maintain. And the point of the critic is after all to separate the bad from the good, and to do so successfully the author reminds the public in another essay, he has to be vain, i.e. wanting to be taken seriously. So much is written and published so without discernment the good risks being smothered by the bad. The critic simply has to make room for the former.

Should a book be entertaining? This is a very legitimate demand the reading public can make, but not on the single author, but on the collective of all authors that make up the literature of a language. In Germany there is a regrettable tendency to look down upon entertaining literature as frivolous, the effect is that entertaining literature becomes really bad, while if the demand had been taken seriously, there would be, I think, what Orwell used to refer to as good bad books². Reich-Ranicki looks wistfully at the Anglo-Saxon and French literature of the previous century. What was Dickens and Balzac if not excellent entertainers? And how come the situation is as it is in Germany? Could it be the influence of Goethe, who took himself very seriously, but not quite as seriously as his admirers took him. The Royal poet par excellence.

The novel is dead or at least in serious crisis. Those alarms have been sounded for many a decade, as is testified by some of the authors essays from the sixties. Reich-Ranicki remains sceptical. Often those who proclaim the novel to be dead are the ones who themselves have failed to write them. On the contrary publishers are happy to publish novels, much more reluctant to publish collections of essays and short stories. The irony is, the author points out, that in the more hectic state of modern life, the short story does not qualify for a renaissance, in spite of predictions of the same. A short story may take less time to read than a novel, on the other hand the time it requires is a totally committed one. You may read a novel in short snatches, and if you miss something, you will be given a second or third chance. Thus a novel is reassuring, not to say restful in its demands, but a short story requires the full attention of the reader, and if he strays he is lost

What are the great German writers of Reich-Ranickis generation, those to which he returns time after time? Bll, Grass, and Lenz are names that occur over and over again. Koeppen is another one, grossly neglected. He is critical of Grass and his tendency always to make statements and to appear in the media. One would think he would be one of the most published authors in Germany. Statistics give the lie to such assumptions. His sales figures are rather modest, and those who enjoy the biggest ones, are authors that are unknown to the literatis.

Has German literature left its Golden age? Was it much better in the past? This is a common preconception, often based on nothing more solid than ignorance (although for sure ignorance can be solid enough). One thing one tends to forget is that many of the great names of the past were unknown during their times. How many literary snobs would have

² One example of which was the Sherlock Holmes stories

appreciated Kafka when he was alive? Fontane is in retrospect a great German author. When he lived almost no one read him. The future reshapes the past retrospectively, and the most charming feature of the past (at least the reasonably recent one) is usually that it was the scene of ones youth.

In a final essay the author considers the multifarious uses to which 'Herz' has been put in the German language. Even such sober writers as Heine have not been immune to it. Goethe abuses it at times, as even the greatest can nod, as when he claims that with a heart you can be a poet. This is a common misunderstanding, Reich-Tanicki claims, that the poet and the writer has a deeper sensibility than the ordinary person. If the 'heart' alone would be sufficient to write a poem, we would be drowned in such efforts. A writer does not feel differently or deeper than other people, he or she is just better at combining the words.

February 5-6, 2006 **Ulf Persson:** *Prof.em, Chalmers U.of Tech., Göteborg Sweden* ulfp@chalmers.se