

Marcel Reich-Ranicki

Marcel Reich-Ranicki (b. 1920), by far the most famous critic in Germany between World War II and the millennium, continues, into the twenty-first century, to exercise, over the German literary scene, a dominance which some writers prefer to regard as a reign of terror. Actually there can be no real argument about the fairness of his judgements – a fact which, of course, makes his disapproval feel even worse for those found wanting. He writes so well that his opinions are quoted verbatim. Victims of a put-down are thus faced with the prospect of becoming a national joke. Most of those writers whose later books were savaged by him had their early books praised by him: those are the writers who become most resentful of all against him. Well equipped to look after himself, he is hard to lay a glove on. Watching magisterial figures such as Günter Grass vainly trying to get their own back on Reich-Ranicki is one of the entertainments of modern Germany. Even those wounded by him would have to admit, under scopolamine, that he can be very funny when on the attack. Hence their intense enjoyment of the moment when history caught him out. Deported from Berlin to the Warsaw ghetto in 1938, Reich-Ranicki survived the Holocaust but stayed on in Communist Poland after the war, and first pursued literary criticism under East German auspices. When he finally defected to the West he forgot to tell anyone that he had been a registered informer under the regime he left behind. Almost everybody was, but he made a mistake in letting someone else say it first. The scandal whipped up on this point did something to offset his impeccable wartime track record as a Jew on the run from the Nazis. But despite the extra animus aroused by what was taken to be his lack of contrition when discomfited, common sense eventually prevailed and his story as a survivor of Nazi horror returned to the centre of attention, especially after he published, at the turn of the millennium, his autobiography *Mein Leben*, which became a best-seller. There was an English translation, called *The Author of Himself*: but understandably it made little impact, his name being so little known outside Germany. Within Germany, he is as well-known as any chancellor, and more likely to last in office. Few critics in any country have ever so outstripped the poets and novelists in being literature's living representative, but there is no mystery about the reason. Vastly and yet vividly learned, his judgement alive in every nuance, he writes with a wonderfully seductive clarity which will be especially appreciated by the beginner in German, who could learn the language from this one writer, just from the way he writes about other writers. His favourite form, the short essay, makes for an easily digestible bite-sized chunk. Collections of these short pieces fill a shelf, and there couldn't be a better way into German literary culture, from the poetry to the politics and vice versa. He writes even better in praise than in dispraise, but, as usually happens, the dispraise is more fun. Reich-Ranicki, well aware of that fact, has often pointed out that a literary culture deprived of rigorous criticism would soon die of niceness. He is obviously correct, but that doesn't stop other writers hoping that he will be nice to them, and from protesting loudly when he isn't.

We shouldn't call a critic a murderer just because it is his duty to sign death certificates.

At the very end of the twentieth century, Germany caught a lucky break. The best-seller lists were dominated for an entire year by *Mein Leben*, the autobiography of Marcel Reich-Ranicki. Germany's toughest literary critic had written a life story to enthrall the nation, but the lucky break didn't come just from the remarkable fact that a man of letters with an unchallenged title to a marble plinth was encamped on top of the best-seller list as well. It came also from the fact that he was a Jew. A large part of his story was about the quirk of chance by which he had survived the Nazi era. It became part of Germany's story, however, and against all the odds, that the most dreadful century of its history was rounded out by an act of redemption. New generations were rushing the bookshops to find out about the crimes that the older generations had committed. Anti-Semitism had been officially over since 1945. Now, in 2000, it was culturally over as well. It might still be said to taint the culture, or even to permeate it: but not to dominate it. A Jew was in the driving seat. So that, at last, was the end of that.

Reich-Ranicki himself was unlikely to burst into tears of joy at these signs of atonement. One of the factors that made his best-selling triumph so satisfactory to the onlooker was that here was no figure of affection being handed a lifetime achievement award. Throughout his career as a critic – which, if you count in his first journalism written in Poland and East Germany, covers the entire post-war period – he has been notoriously unbiddable. A characteristic collection of pieces was published in 1984 as *haute Verisse*, which pretty well means 'Naked Hatchet-Jobs.' In actuality he has a wide range of literary sympathy and is one of the rare critics in any language who can be as enjoyable in approbation as in the opposite. He has always had a way of recommending a book that sends you flying to find it: try *not* to read Theodor Fontane's nineteenth-century classic novel *Effi Briest* after Reich-Ranicki has got through praising it. But there can be no denying that he is a tough customer, and some of the living writers on whom he has passed negative judgement have made their wounded feelings known. There have been pitiable whimpers and loud squeals from the injured, and when MR-R (just as the *Kaiserliche und Königliche* Austro-Hungarian Empire used to be called *k.u.k* in print because it had to be mentioned so often, Reich-Ranicki is customarily referred to by his monogram) was caught up with by his pre-Western past, there were plenty of literary onlookers who found it hard not to enjoy his discomfort. The facts said that he had never done much for the Communist government of East Germany except to go through the motions of informing on people who had no secrets to keep, but for once MR-R was on the back foot, and fellow scribes who had been decked by him were glad to see it, especially if they lacked his gift of being vitriolic. One of his abiding flaws is to suppose that writers offended in their dignity have the expressive power to answer him if they wish. Commendably eager to avoid praising himself, he is slow to realize that his easy habit of buttonholing an audience through a newspaper is more than just a trick, it's a talent.

But the gift for being vitriolic counts for nothing unless it is contained within the larger gift of being appreciative. Nobody minds being knocked by the kind of critic who does nothing but knock. What hurts is being knocked by the critic whose praise you would like to have, and every living writer in the German-speaking countries would like to have MR-R's endorsement. The same would probably go for the dead, if their opinion could be consulted. MR-R is a critic who has always written as well as any writer, so even his most bitter enemies are aware from the starting gun that his own literary status is already settled, although he has never claimed such a thing for himself. He has

always held to the principle (which was also favoured by Stefan Zweig) that great artists are disqualified from being objective critics, because they are always thinking of how *they* would have done it. Following Friedrich Schlegel, MR-R said it of the greatest German writer, Goethe. To say of the author of *Faust* that he was too much of a poet to know much about the arts was pretty bold, when you consider how much Goethe knew about everything, but it was characteristic of MR-R to take on the biggest example and make his argument stick. What he really meant was that Goethe's critical judgements were all self-serving, and that the fact should be remembered when you are under the intoxicating impression that Goethe, to make a single point, is invoking the whole aesthetic world. MR-R has always held that the business of judging a book is strictly ad hoc: he professes not to like the criticism that sets itself up as 'an alternative airfield' and uses the subject as a pretext to stage an airlift of everything the critic wants to bring in to prove himself powerful. For MR-R to take this line was an act of self-denial, because he himself was very well equipped to play the *uomo universale*. Just because he has an incurable knack of making himself sound arrogant shouldn't deafen us to the truth of his humility. Advancing the principle that the great artist can't criticize with a pure heart, he has been ready to live by the unspoken corollary, that no objective critic can be a great artist. He has been ready to live by it, but he could never make it stick. He writes too well. No wonder he is feared.

Marcel Reich-Ranicki writes so well that he can point a critical judgement and make poetry of it, so that you remember the prose aperçu like a balanced line of verse. In his book *Nachprüfung* he calls Joseph Roth a '*Vagabond mit Kavaliersmanieren*' (p. 210). A vagabond with the manners of a cavalier: the perfect way to remember Roth, of whom we can be sure that when he was drinking himself to death in Paris in the late 1930s, he made no disturbance. Here is something more about Joseph Roth from the same source, and this is even better, because it captures what made the texture of Roth's writing so enchanting: 'He always made it easy for his readers and often made it hard for his interpreters.' But in the German the antithesis is less ponderously arranged: '*Er hat es seinen Lesern immer leicht und seinen Interpreten oft schwer gemacht.*' MR-R, as you can see, does the same: his German is so plainly carpentered that a beginner feels at home in it, and so neatly joined syntactically that it is hard to translate without pulling it to pieces. To round out the subject of MR-R's admiration for Roth, it should be said that MR-R also possesses the creative critic's essential gift of being able to quote from any source but always to the purpose. The man of letters Karl Heinz Bohrer said that Roth was a moralist out of stylistic purity, and a stylist out of moral sensitivity. Not even MR-R can improve on that, so he quotes it: just what a good critic should do, but it takes humility to do it – the kind of humility that needs an air of arrogance to protect its Delphic mission.

MR-R has never been just a stylist judging style, although there are worse things to be than someone who can do that. He can get to the heart of a writer and stay there, sometimes for decades. In the heart of Thomas Mann he set up shop. His book on the Mann family is the first thing to read on the subject (although first you should read the subject, which takes a good chunk of a lifetime) but if he had never talked about any of them except Thomas Mann he would still have done a lot to get the titan in context – and from the inside, which is the hard part. '*Er hat fast nichts erlebt und fast alles beschrieben.*' He experienced almost nothing and described almost everything: it was too true to be cruel. MR-R takes that truth as an invitation to extend his enquiries, not to shut them down. He has never stopped being interested in, or being interesting about, Thomas Mann; but always on the understanding that Thomas Mann devoted his life and art to needing no such assistance. So why is a critic necessary? Well, there are all those other critics who aren't, and they will hardly shut up unless

contested: someone has to speak plain sense. There was a lot Thomas Mann could do, but he couldn't always do that. In the style of a great creative writer, too many clarities collide and make rainbows: sorting out the spectral maelstrom is a long job.

There have been other great names that MR-R has felt no compulsion to cling on to. He has always been a great one for echoing Tallulah Bankhead's vocal judgement during a self-consciously advanced production of a play by Maeterlinck: 'There's less in this than meets the eye.' Admirers of Walter Benjamin were disconcerted to find that MR-R thought him short of the very thing he was supposed to have in abundant stock: profundity. MR-R thought Benjamin the critic made a mistake in trying to think like a writer. MR-R skewered Benjamin's character on the basis of Benjamin's snobbish remarks about Walter Mehring's social background. (Mehring was a catchpenny writer of lyrics and sketches under the Weimar Republic, and in exile he was a bit of a liability, but he was also a genuine lover of books, as his lament for his lost library, *Die verlorene Bibliothek*, subsequently revealed.) When you consider that Benjamin's prestige as a pundit continues to be almost as high within Germany as outside it, you begin to grasp just how brave MR-R can be, or at any rate how cocky he can sound. On his ZDF television talk show *Das literarische Quartett* he regularly advances the outrageous opinion that no contemporary novel longer than 500 pages can possibly be worth reading. (A book of transcripts from the show, collected under the snappy title '*...und alle Fragen offen*,' comes in at 768 pages, but is very much worth reading.) Though his fellow panellists and most of the television audience secretly agree with him, they all delight in ascribing such opinions to his choleric impatience, and indeed he always looks as if he is about to bite the book he is holding in half, even if he says he likes it. But the short shrift he customarily extends to the profundities of *Kunstwissenschaft* ought not to be ascribed to the supposed brevity of his attention span. He has taken the time to understand what the higher criticism is on about. He just doesn't agree with it.

MR-R wants the critic's job kept down to earth. Really he wants the writer's job kept down there too. In a culture where the sublime has always seductively beckoned, his has been a useful corrective emphasis: a shift of direction towards talking turkey and away from *Mumpitz*, that useful German word for exalted twaddle. There is a danger of know-nothing savagery, but he offsets that by knowing everything. Politically clued up, he has always been able to approach contemporary German writers through what tends to be their blind spot, which is their attitude to liberal democracy. In a cockfight whose flying feathers have not yet settled, MR-R leapt on Günter Grass for flirting with the notion that at least the old DDR had had a system of belief. (Graham Greene used to peddle the same line about the West's deficiency in faith, but apart from Dwight Macdonald there was no Reich-Ranicki to tear into him.) Contrary to the received opinion among MR-R's more embittered opponents in Germany, he has always been hospitable enough to any writer who has found the capitalist West deficient in human values. He just punishes any lingering suggestion that the totalitarian East might have had a surplus of them. His credentials were impeccable: the East was where he came from. The credentials looked less impeccable when it turned out that part of the price he paid for staying in the East at the end of the war was that he had to turn stoolie, but his personal history – though he made a mistake in not admitting it before it was revealed – couldn't invalidate the attacks he launched on writers in the East after he himself had made it to the West. Regretfully but firmly, he dismantled the claims to seriousness of those East German writers who did not, as he did, take it on the lam, but who stayed on, compromised with the State, and flourished. He argued, surely correctly, that the

compromise not only turned their opinions to apologetics, it turned their literature to propaganda. But the unyielding strictness with which he said so has understandably been held against him, and raises the question of whether a critic should ever throw a stone without remembering his house is made of glass.

When we look at the quoted statement carefully, however, we see that MR-R is claiming no such right. The death certificate is signed by a doctor. It is the death *sentence* that is signed by a judge. The judgement MR-R is talking about is the diagnostic one about whether the work presented to him is alive or dead, not about whether it should live or die. As long as this is borne in mind, it seems to me that the irascible arch-critic is on strong ground. He is often called *Henker*, hangman, but it's a nickname. At most he is a grave-digger, and what would we do without those? We have a right, though, to ask grave-diggers for a modicum of tact. Hamlet met one with the saving grace of humour. MR-R's humour is real and often hilarious, but he would do better to make his fellow-feeling more obvious more often. In old age, heaped with honours and uncontested in his position, he continues to write as if he had not yet made it. One of the most piquant complaints in his autobiography is how he was not made to feel at home in the German literary world: it is a complaint that goes all the way back to Jakob Wassermann, whose case is cited in MR-R's indispensable pocket book *Der doppelte Boden* (The False Bottom). Under the Weimar Republic, Wassermann was nationally famous but felt he did not belong. MR-R, nationally famous in a democratic Germany half a century after the Holocaust, still feels the same. If it is the condition of the Jew in Germany, then the condition is historically incurable. (There is a lot to prove that the German intellectual world has done everything in its power to make amends.) But it might be just personal. Not many artists feel secure in their posts, and Marcel Reich-Ranicki is an artist if anybody is: an artist of criticism if you like, but for anyone who can write a sentence the way he can, the option to rule himself out is not open. As MR-R has always been the first to insist, a critic is not a scientist, because there is no Golden Yardstick: no *Metermass*. That leaves the critic as either artist or factotum. MR-R claims the lower status, but the way he writes condemns him to the higher. I came to German late, and it has sometimes been a hard tussle with my thick wits: but knowing what I know now, if I had never learned it to read anyone else, I would have learned it just to read him.