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## Christa Reinig (1926-2008)

[Amy Kepple Strawser \(Otterbein University\)](#)

Novelist; Humourist; Satirist.

Active 1949-2008 in Germany

On 6 August 2006, Christa Reinig celebrated her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, an event recognized in the news media and on the literary scene in Germany. The author, a long-time resident of Munich, used to live there in relative seclusion, rarely granting interviews in the final years of her life. Reinig published poetry, prose, and radio plays since the late 1940s. Although the multi-faceted dimensions of the author's life create fertile ground for rich comparisons with her contemporaries, her identity as a feminist lesbian writer, active in the women's movement in the 1970s and 1980s, marks her career as uniquely productive and courageous.

There are a number of similarities to other post-war German-language writers that can be traced in Reinig's case: she cared for her mother until her death in East Berlin in the 1950s, as Nelly Sachs (q. v.) had done before her while in exile in Sweden during the “Third Reich”. Like her former compatriots from the German Democratic Republic, Helga M. Novak (q. v.) and Wolf Biermann, Christa Reinig left the GDR relatively early in her literary career (1964) due in part to publishing restrictions on her work by the government. Christa Reinig – who had gained renown primarily as a writer of verse – abandoned the lyric genre after 1979 and henceforth wrote primarily prose, as had her contemporary, the Austrian poet Ingeborg Bachmann (q. v.), also later in her career. Reinig's reclusiveness is reminiscent of Novak's, and her use of all lower-case letters in her poetry is a practice also employed by the Iranian-German poet SAID and the American poet e. e. cummings (q. v.).

Yet other aspects of Reinig's biography and career set her decidedly apart from her literary contemporaries. First, a debilitating accident in 1971 left the author permanently disabled. Second, her activism in the German women's movement held steady for nearly two decades. Her self-proclaimed stance as a radical feminist lesbian, in conjunction with being a writer of high caliber, has secured her a unique place in the German literary sphere of her generation (while it at the same time evokes an intriguing counterpart to the acclaimed American lesbian poets Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich). Moreover, Reinig's interest in mysticism, magic, Buddhism, and the Chinese I Ching informs her work from a perspective markedly different from the predominantly non-spiritually-inclined, politically-engaged intellectualism of many post-war authors in Germany, women and men alike. In sharp contrast, after her coming out as a radical feminist lesbian, Reinig later proved to be fiercely and fearlessly political *and* metaphysical in both her writing and her creative persona.

Christa Reinig was born in Berlin on 6 August 1926. She belonged to an East-West German literary group called the “Zukunftssachliche Dichter” (Future-Minded Poets, 1949-55) who published the newspaper *Evviva*

*Future!* in West Berlin before the building of the Berlin Wall in 1961, an event which henceforth prevented such collaborations. Thus Reinig's style is frequently far from realistic; however, as a young working-class woman who entered the *Arbeiter- und Bauernfakultät* (Worker's and Farmer's College, Humboldt University), Reinig certainly had already gained a worker's perspective of the world. In her youth and young adulthood, she held many different positions, from floral to clerical worker, from post-war construction to factory worker, and eventually studied art history and Christian archaeology at Humboldt University in East Berlin from 1953 to 1957. She was an archivist and assistant museum curator at the Märkisches Museum in East Berlin after her studies. Before establishing herself as a professional writer, Reinig experimented with writing verse and narratives and read widely in German and world literature. She has cited some of her influences as Rilke (q. v.), Borges (q. v.), and the late fiction of Ingeborg Bachmann. Her earlier aversion to Brecht (q. v.), based on his alleged status as a traitor to the working class among her fellow college students during the early years of the GDR, was later overcome by an appreciation of his poetry and plays. While many critics have viewed Reinig's primary genre as poetry, she considered herself a storyteller at heart. Indeed, in keeping with her inclination toward the supernatural and the occult, Reinig's literary predilections tend towards science fiction, horror stories, thrillers and suspense.

In the existing critical studies on Reinig's oeuvre, most scholars have honed in on the juncture of the pre-feminist and (post)feminist phases of her works in the mid-1970s as the decisive moment in her writing career. Male critics are said to prefer the early books, while feminist readers tend to be more drawn to the later publications. The novel *Entmannung* [*Emasculation*, 1976], whose central character is male, has been the focus of many critiques in the secondary literature by male and female critics alike. The provocative theme of the book as reflected in the title has spurred debate about whether the author actually rallies her female readers to aggressive action against men and the patriarchy they represent, a charge she has denied. Reinig spoke of the book as a metaphorical or fantastic portrayal of the gender wars when she clearly differentiated between what she views as the distinct realms of literature and everyday life. One of Reinig's earliest and longest poems, "Ballade vom blutigen Bomme" ["Ballad of Bloody Bomme"] from her first volume of poetry *Die Steine von Finisterre* [*The Stones of Finisterre*, 1961] has become her best known work, again perhaps because of its scandalous-sounding title and its treatment of the macabre.

In addition to six volumes of poetry, Reinig published nine collections of stories, three novels, four radio plays, and three volumes of epigrams in verse form. Two of these three latter volumes are collections of *Sprüche* (aphorisms): *Müssiggang ist aller Liebe Anfang* [*Idleness is the Root of All Love*, 1979] presents a calendar year full of wise and humorous aphorisms from the lives of a mature lesbian couple. *Der Frosch im Glas* [*The Frog in the Glass*, 1994] contains new adages from three to five lines in length, which offer distilled lyrical wisdom and keen observations. The third of these is a gathering of brief poems meant to be found along the roadside where people have died in automobile accidents: *Schwabinger Marterln* [*Schwabing Roadside Epitaphs*, 1968]. Among Reinig's final literary endeavours, *Simsalabim* [*Hey-Presto*, 1999] is a narrative collection whose title piece details the aspirations and disappointments of three writers on a literary reading tour. In celebration of her 80<sup>th</sup> birthday, Reinig also published *Das Gelbe vom Himmel: Betrachtungen* [*The Yellow of the Sky: Observations*] in September 2006.

Christa Reinig also published two extended dialogues with literary critics, and both of these afford illuminating glances into the author's biographical background, her creative process, as well as her views as a writer. In her conversation with radio literary critic Ekkehart Rudolph (*Mein Herz ist eine gelbe Blume* [*My Heart is a Yellow Flower*, 1978]), Reinig elaborates on her view of the task and place of the writer in the world and in literature:

Ich unterscheide zwischen Dingen, die in der Welt nicht stimmen und die man ändern kann, und Dingen, die man *nicht* ändern kann, obwohl sie auch nicht stimmen. Angenommen, ich würde auf irgendetwas stossen, das ich ändern könnte, dann würde ich nicht literarisch herangehen, dann schriebe ich einen Brief an den Verantwortlichen und versuchte, mich mit ihm auseinanderzusetzen; das hat mit

Literatur, wie ich sie verstehe, nichts zu tun. Wenn ich literarisch arbeite, dann arbeite ich meistens über die Dinge, die in der Welt nicht stimmen, die ich aber auch nicht ändern will, weil ich einsehe, dass ich sie nicht ändern kann. Das ist vielleicht mein literarisches Engagement.

[I differentiate between things in the world that aren't right and that can be changed, and things that can't be changed although they also aren't right. It's assumed that if I would come across anything that I could change, then I wouldn't approach it in a literary way, then I'd write a letter to the responsible party and try to settle the matter with him; that has nothing to do with literature as I understand it. When I work on literature, then I usually work on things that aren't right in the world that I also don't want to change because I understand that I can't change them. Perhaps that is my literary engagement.]

Eight years later, Reinig was extensively interviewed by the literary scholar Marie-Luise Gansberg and her student (*Erkennen, was die Rettung ist* [*Realize What Your Salvation Is*, 1986]). In this book, the author reveals more details about her involvement in the German women's movement in particular and world feminism in general.

In an epilogue to the author's collected poems (*Gesammelte Gedichte 1960-1979*, 1985) titled "Lyrik als Arbeit" ["Poetry as Work"], Reinig begins by stating the starting point for her writing: "Mein bestimmendes Motiv war, aus meinem Leben etwas zu machen, nicht ruhmlos untergehen, nicht mein kostbares Leben vergeuden, indem ich anderen Leuten, und seien es die liebsten der Welt, den Dreck wegräume" ["My decisive motive was to make something of my life, not to perish ingloriously, not to squander my precious life, by clearing away the dirt from other people's lives, even the kindest people in the world"]. It is fitting that one of Reinig's best-known poems, "Robinson", describes the existence of the famed castaway with qualities that approximate Reinig's life and work:

manchmal weint er wenn die worte  
still in seiner kehle stehn  
doch er lernt an seinem orte  
schweigend mit sich umzugehn

und erfindet alte dinge  
halb aus not und halb im spiel  
splittert stein zur messerklinge  
schnürt die axt an einen stiel

kratzt mit einer muschelkante  
seinen namen in die wand  
und der allzu oft genannte  
wird ihm langsam unbekannt

[sometimes he cries when the words  
silently stick in his throat  
still he learns how to get along  
in his place without a word

and invents old things  
half from need and half in play  
splinters stone to a knife blade  
binds the axe onto a handle

scratches with a mussel shell  
into the wall his name  
and, too often called before,  
it slowly is forgotten now]

Beyond the chosen genre, beyond her unique style, and beyond gender and sexual politics, Reinig never ceased to amaze with her gift for language, her cutting-edge humor and satire, and her wide-ranging imagination. She wrote in an accessible, down-to-earth manner that easily touched and moved her readers. Her voice resonated deeply and her words painted colorful narratives and lyrics through ingenious characters and creatures. Harking back to the similarities that the poet shares with others of her generation, there remains the most troubling while perhaps the most important commonality: given the tremendous scope and breadth of her literary output, precious little has yet been analyzed in the critical literature about her work. Much the same can be said about many other post-war German women writers, especially those who have written poetry. It appears to be high time for feminist and other scholars to acknowledge Christa Reinig's corpus of poetry and fiction for all its wealth.

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