Memorial tribute to Héna Maes Jelinek

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Abstract
Héna Maes Jelinek died on July 8, 2008. With her death one of the founding mothers of the study of Commonwealth Literature and, later, Postcolonial studies in Europe left us. I write this obituary both as a fellow academic in the field of Postcolonial studies and as a friend.
Memorial Tribute to Héna Maes Jelinek

Héna Maes Jelinek died on July 8, 2008. With her death one of the founding mothers of the study of Commonwealth Literature and, later, Postcolonial studies in Europe left us. I write this obituary both as a fellow academic in the field of Postcolonial studies and as a friend.

Thinking about Héna’s path into prominence in the new and grossly undervalued study of Commonwealth Literature is thinking in terms of world history. What could make a fiercely intellectual, ambitious and successful woman in Belgium, who was well established in the academic world, choose to throw her considerable energy and intellect into such an underrated, non-established and academically despised field as ‘Commonwealth Literature’? There are of course, a multitude of answers to such a question, but I will take my starting point in a casual remark a friend of mine, Leigh Dale, once made in the course of a conversation. She maintained that no matter what idea you might get into your head to research and write about, in the end it was always about yourself — or words to that effect. Héna was born to Jewish parents who emigrated from the former Czechoslovakia to Belgium just before the Second World War, and she survived the War hidden away in a Catholic boarding school run by nuns, together with her cousin and younger sister. Most of her widespread family died in the Holocaust. After the war, her main wish was to leave Europe as far behind as possible, and when she was offered a Mormon scholarship to study in Salt Lake City she took it; but after a year in America she was called back by her sister’s illness, and while looking after her she met her future husband who was firmly rooted in Walloon society, so she stayed and started her career at the university of Liége.

Academic success and a good position in Liége society might for some have sufficed as a vindication of self-esteem and national rights, but Héna looked further than herself. After a thesis on Criticism of Society in the English Novel between the Wars she was drawn to the field of Commonwealth Studies which, during the sixties, was in the process of defining and establishing itself as an oppositional discourse by giving space to the marginalised voices from the former colonies. This was a somewhat tentative beginning of listening to the expressions of hurt and anger from the formerly colonised people and of accepting and then fighting for their rights to express those feelings, and it also demanded an acceptance of the justice of that anger. However tentative this beginning may have been, by aligning yourself with this group you were demanding an acknowledgement of grievous wrongs done in the not-so-distant past to millions of people by the main
powers of Western civilisation. Like her close friend, Anna Rutherford, who had the wrongs done to the Catholics throughout Australian history in her baggage, Héna threw her considerable energy into the righting of wrongs on an even larger scale than her own, and into looking for a new and different way of perceiving the world. She writes that she remembers ‘a sense of excitement at discovering ... new ways of perceiving other worlds’, and this awakened in her an enthusiasm for ‘original poets and novelists … who were bringing a new authenticity — their authenticity — to literature’ (A Talent(ed) Digger xv).

Héna’s search for new and alternative ways of looking at the world found a perfect outlet in her engagement with the mystical and difficult writing of the West Indian writer and philosopher Wilson Harris. In his writing she found the perfect combination of intellectual challenge and intuitive search for a vision of ‘a dialectic process of renewal’ (Héna) which can only be achieved through a ‘capacity to digest and liberate contrasting spaces’ (Wilson Harris), and in the conclusion to an early article about Palace of the Peacock, in Enigma of Values Héna states that ‘a sense of humility and compassion towards oneself and others ... is tentatively aimed at counteracting one’s “fear of strangeness and catastrophe in a destitute world”’ (106). Through several books Héna became the authority on the writing of Wilson Harris.

Héna was also extremely hard working, and this resulted in — apart from the Wilson Harris books — a large number of articles about a variety of authors and subjects within the fast expanding field of what became Postcolonial Studies. Héna was one of the editors of the Cross/Cultures series ‘Readings in the Post/Colonial Literatures in English’ published by Rodopi, the firm that she had helped set up together with Geoffrey Davis and Gordon Collier, and she was one of the founder members of our association and has been chairperson of European ACLALS for two terms.

Ironically, Héna was given an OBE by the British government for her contribution to the knowledge of English language literature, and both ironically and understandably, she loved it.

Behind her drive and all the achievements, Héna was a very special friend to have. She was a demanding friend, you could lose her friendship, as I did for a while, but you could also regain it. In her own life, she had the capacity for renewal and change, which she explored and advocated in her academic work. To be with, she was hospitable, kind, a great cook, an art lover, intellectually demanding, a power shopper and the most courageous survivor against all odds I have ever met. I have stayed with her, travelled with her, quarrelled with her, admired her and come to love her dearly, and now to miss her badly.

Kirsten Holst Petersen