

ELAINE READING, READING ELAINE

By Jacob Stockinger

“The personal is political.”

Long before that phrase entered the common vocabulary, Professor Elaine Marks (1930-2001) was living it out in her life and career, both of which taught her that the personal is also literary. As a post-Holocaust Jew, a woman and a lesbian, Elaine experienced the Existentialist doctrine of “otherness” years before she ever studied it or taught it through French literature, specifically through her groundbreaking studies of Colette, Simone de Beauvoir, French gay and lesbian literature, postwar feminism and Jewish French writers. Otherness in all its forms, but especially outlaw love and transgressive desire, also drew her to other great French writers including Villon, Racine, Proust and Baudelaire.

You could measure Elaine Marks’ contributions in countless ways by looking at individual writers and their works. But all Elaine’s efforts were of a piece, linked in ways that explain why she remained a beloved teacher, an eminent scholar and a cherished friend. Never a narrow academic, Elaine embodied the humanist who takes a larger and more accepting view of humanity, her own and others’.

The first key to reading Elaine is that, for all her personal charm, she possessed a first-rate mind that remained unrelenting in its curiosity and its quest for truth and beauty. Elaine transcended identity and the easy kind of feminism, gay studies or Jewish studies that contented itself by simply asserting its validity as a fact, whether social, political or biographical. Elaine always demanded original and disciplined thinking. While others scholars seemed content to talk about women, Jews or lesbians first, and only then as writers, Elaine insisted that such approaches only had literary meaning and merit if they could yield new intellectual insights. Through her hard and persistent work, they did.

But there was also the Elaine Marks who was grounded in the physical world. She loved fine food, beautiful music, handsome clothes, hearty laughs, animated conversation and all things sensual. Perhaps it was this side that first led her to treat Colette as a serious thinker and writer, not just as a feminine voice that expressed the domestic and fleeting details of daily life overlooked by so many male writers. For Elaine, language and ideas possessed a physical materiality and emotional directness. To her, words and texts were as much a force of nature as nature itself

Today, when entire university departments exist in the fields she pioneered, it is easy to forget what an original and powerful, even daring, voice Elaine Marks spoke in and wrote with. It is fitting, then, even as so many of the cultural, artistic and intellectual values she championed are again under attack by misguided moralists, that we remember Elaine Marks and vow never again to return to the ignorance that begets intolerance.

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