

in *The Mikado* (and everyone else), Henricksen has his own little list of repressions. It includes violent rap and television evangelism. Those are his choices. But they are, of course, choices that large numbers of young African Americans or fervent Christians would perceive as intolerable. But these groups, too, have their lists, none of which would lead to censorship that was self-evidently good from other points of view but all of which dramatize the complexity of negotiating censorship's necessity.

Because he is for some kinds of censorship, but not those directed at poets, Henricksen assumes he has refuted my contention that censorship and literature are fated to oppose each other. He makes this assumption because of his misprision not only of the category of censorship but also—in his unproblematic invocation of it—of the category “poetry.” I suspect that just as Henricksen seems to think censorship is definable as all that has been called censorship, he assumes that the meaning of literature is exhausted by all that has been nominated literature. It is no cause for surprise, then, that just as he resists defining censorship as a force larger than any of the particular names history has randomly assigned it, so he rejects “literariness,” which is the category under which poetry is treated in my essay. While Jakobson’s “literariness,” Bakhtin’s “novelness,” and de Man’s “poeticity” differ in important aspects, they all understand literariness to comprise texts in which “negative knowledge about the reliability of linguistic utterance is made available” (22). It is in this sense I invoke literariness as a force that powerfully contests prohibition. Literariness engenders acts of reading whose complexity makes it the best hope of a reliable ground for discrimination that human agents have. In other words, my point was, and is, that because we cannot step out of the space of prohibition, we are fated to responsibility.

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Laura (Riding) Jackson

To the Editor:

The January 1994 special-topic issue of *PMLA* addresses the injustice of censorship, yet Peter S. Temes’s essay on Laura (Riding) Jackson inflicts another kind of injury (“Code of Silence: Laura (Riding) Jackson and the Refusal to Speak” 109 [1994]: 87–99). Temes’s weapon is innuendo. Instead of using argument and evidence to dispute his sources,

he makes several snide comments in his endnotes. His strategy is apparent before he gets to me: he writes that Michael A. Masopust’s analysis of Riding’s reasons for rejecting poetry “is, at best, superficial” (98n1). In another endnote, Temes writes of my book, *Laura Riding’s Pursuit of Truth* (1979), that “the analysis in the study tends to be simplistic and sometimes troubling—for instance, Wexler attributes the committed party socialism of (Riding) Jackson’s father to his ‘ethnic background’ as a Jew” (98n7).

Dismissing my book as simplistic is merely name-calling, but characterizing my analysis as troubling crosses the line of scholarly ethics. When Temes professes to be troubled by one of my sentences, he cloaks an insinuation of anti-Semitism in self-righteous distress. His vagueness allows him to evade responsibility for what he implies. The passage in question stands at the beginning of chapter 2 of my book: “‘I was born in New York City, of Jewish (but not religiously so) parents,’ Riding wrote in 1942. Although her father was not religious, he expressed his ethnic background by becoming a devout socialist. He was an outgoing man who enjoyed theoretical discussions, whether of literature, politics, or economics” (6).

I attribute the socialism of Riding’s father, Nathaniel Reichenthal, to his ethnic background no more than I attribute it to his outgoing nature in the next sentence. It is Temes who detects attribution in this passage. My wording does not imply that Reichenthal became a socialist because of his religion. I do not claim that there is something about Jews and extroverts that makes them become socialists, but I do assert a connection between the specific circumstances of Reichenthal’s life and his politics.

I follow Riding in distinguishing religious observance from ethnic identity. My sentence glosses hers by explaining that in becoming a socialist her father did not distance himself from his ethnic identity—as she did from hers by changing her name from Reichenthal to Riding. (Her forthright statement in 1942 contrasts with her previous efforts to conceal her background.) Socialism rivaled religion as a communal bond for late-nineteenth-century Jewish immigrants from eastern Europe. In Irving Howe’s words, “Jewish Socialism was far more than a politics—it was a gleaming faith, at once splendid and naive in its dreams of perfection and brotherhood” (*How We Lived* 161).

Reichenthal’s politics were part of a well-documented social movement. Deborah Baker’s excellent biography of Riding, *In Extremis* (1993), details Reichenthal’s participation in Jewish socialist organi-

zations and situates his activities in historical context. Baker points out that “the traditional fears of the Jewish patriarchs had come true in this first generation of socialists and intellectuals in America: they were unbelievers” (24).

Because Temes fails to distinguish between essentialism and respect for an individual’s cultural position, he insinuates that I am guilty of ethnic stereotyping. But ideas and identity are always the products of cultural forces, which are varied and numerous. Socialism was so widespread among Jewish immigrants of Reichenthal’s generation that it is impossible for anyone who knows the social history of the period to disregard the correlation.

Temes’s unseemly eagerness to detect prejudice replaced scholarly diligence. Innuendo is not argument, and endnotes are not havens for snipers.

JOYCE WEXLER
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Reply:

I hope that interested readers will consult Joyce Wexler’s 1979 book about (Riding) Jackson and decide for themselves whether it is at all troubling or simplistic. I am glad that Wexler quotes her remark about (Riding) Jackson’s father. Reading it again, I am chilled once more by her suggestion that in some way Jewishness is expressed through socialism. I don’t mean to imply that Wexler is anti-Semitic; I mean instead that the idea that anyone’s “ethnic background” could be “expressed” through socialism (or any other political doctrine) is wrong in a way that encourages racism. Wexler’s discussion about the social and economic situation of Jews and other immigrants early in this century makes sense. Yes, it seems that those conditions would have encouraged a distaste for capitalism. But what Wexler wrote in 1979 about (Riding) Jackson’s father was not that he expressed his poverty and anger through his socialism and not that there was “a connection between the

specific circumstances of [his] life and his politics,” as she writes in her letter. What she wrote in 1979 and what I made specific reference to in my article was that this man “expressed his ethnic background by becoming a devout socialist.”

A second issue in Wexler’s letter concerns the practice of scholarship generally. She says that it is wrong for me as a scholar to suggest in endnotes that the work of another scholar is superficial or troubling, without a substantial consideration of the work in question. I am sure that many will agree with her, but I do not. In my opinion, scholarly ethics demand that I note the troubling dangers I see in Wexler’s connection between ethnic identity and socialism. My justification for calling her book simplistic is less clear-cut but is, I believe, valid. Given that my article was not about Wexler, I felt it inappropriate to argue my reservations in detail. And yet to cite the book without noting them would have been, I think, to affirm something about it that I did not want to affirm. Would scholars perform a better service if they chose not to note what they perceived as serious shortcomings in books that they briefly cited? if they avoided a subjective word like “simplistic,” even when it expressed their meaning precisely, and pretended instead that their judgments were somehow something other than subjective?

I can’t propose to offer answers to these questions beyond my own practice as a writer. Scholars put forward their research, their evidence, and also some amount of judgment. I don’t think we should be afraid of offering critical asides about books that need to be mentioned but that we find lacking. Let’s not pretend that we think that every book we cite is as good as every other, and let’s not limit our service to readers by withholding judgment. To exclude such passing references from the endnotes in a full-length article seems to me to force an image of greater consensus than really exists among scholars. Readers are entitled to hear the voices in conflict as well as the voices in concert.

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