

## HARRY LEVIN

1912-1994

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Harry Levin was seventeen when he arrived at Harvard in 1929 little dreaming that he would remain in Cambridge for the rest of his life. In later years he described how "looking out of his study window, in the general direction of Waltham" he found inspiration in the fact that his home was no more than a stone's throw from Divinity Hall where in 1837 Ralph Waldo Emerson sketched the American scholar of the future. Certainly by the end of his life one could consider Levin as the living embodiment of what Emerson had foreseen, framed in a live tradition and in a university where there was "a central concern for intellectual matters." The young scholar came from the Middle West, from Minneapolis, where he was born to Jewish parents sufficiently affluent to provide a good education for their children. Long before he went to Cambridge, Harry Levin had read himself into the classics and the Renaissance, and had a good sense of German and French. In an autobiographical sentence, in one of his essays, he summarized his career in a depersonalized way: "If you started amid the classics and found yourself straying after the strange gods of modernity, if the circumstances of education gave you some exposure to life abroad, if you had a naturalized parent--or better still, a spouse--with a constant recollection of other worlds, if more of your apprenticeship was served in free-lancing criticism for critical journals than in filling doctoral requirements of an English department, then pure luck had set you on the path and pointed out the destination."

Obviously there was much more than "pure luck." Levin was a prodigy of learning. His father had given him a complete Shakespeare when he was eleven, and he had found the language "alluring" and seen some of the great plays in road shows at the Minneapolis opera-house. He astonished his Harvard instructors by his verbal power, his generous impulses, his personal ease and security. He was in no way a bewildered or struggling student and presently the instructors seemed to regard him as one of them. Later when he finally became a teacher, he was one of the first to lecture in a dazzling way about difficult authors, Joyce, Proust, Mann. His naturalized father had emigrated from Germany and made Harry aware of the great German writers as well as Shakespeare--who had been *unser* Shakespeare to the Germans for some time. Levin's American-born mother had studied music. There was considerable aesthetic feeling in the household and the Middle Western environment looked eastward and Europeward for the culture of the Old World. The charming Radcliffe student, the "spouse" of Harry's allusion, was Elena Ivanovna Zarudnaya, and her Russian world attached itself to the American-German worlds of the cultured young man. Harry's allusion to the "other worlds" of his father and his wife was a recall of Coriolanus's

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speech after his banishment from Rome where the tyrannical soldier invokes "a world elsewhere" if he cannot have his own. Harry often quoted this. He kept his own world and sought others. All his studies led him to literatures and languages "elsewhere" and he was to become America's foremost professor of what used to be called "Comparative Literature" before our addiction to "multi-culture."

There remains his allusion to doctoral requirements. Harry Levin was sufficiently wise and learned to feel that a Ph.D. would be simply surfeit. He also wasn't certain he wanted to become a teacher. During the period of his free-lancing, he was so successful as to entertain an idea that he would continue simply to review and write essays on the complex moderns of literature. He had come under the influence of T. S. Eliot during his senior year. Eliot was at Harvard delivering the Norton lectures. "Here was a legend become a reality before our very eyes--the legendary reality of a Midwestern boy who, by way of New England, had somehow managed to enter the mainstream of English literature. It was quite improbable and, obviously, inimitable. Yet his example gave heart to youthful admirers like myself." Eliot published an undergraduate essay of Levin's in the *Criterion*. He became Levin's lifelong friend, even though Harry candidly criticized his growing conservatism.

Harry might indeed have gone on reviewing. His reviews were sharp, witty, and attracted attention. Allen Tate called Levin "a young Turk," Edmund Wilson recognized Harry's grasp of the *avant-garde*. But young Levin was a man of scruples and strong beliefs. He recognized that he was troubled: he had no sense of the kind of audience he was writing for when he published articles in the *Atlantic Monthly*. Nor was he sure what subjects to address. Years later he confessed in the *Partisan Review*, (on which he had turned his back three or four decades earlier) that he had been put off by "the more insistent watchwords of partisanship." He had not known Communism in Minneapolis and in any event preferred Thorstein Veblen and his Non-Partisan League. Then there had been the "New Critics" who had wooed him with their aestheticism. He preferred to seek middle ground between them and the historicism they overlooked. Harry turned away from the mercurial Manhattan publishers and writers; he would write occasional reviews, but refused to become involved with literary journalism and the constant espousal of new fashions. "If we seek the truth, every conceivable path to it should be considered," he said. Other remarks he let drop at various times showed his quest for objectivity, however difficult this might be. "Critical catchwords, at best, are no more than pedagogical generalizations." "We ought not to become the prisoners of our categories." "Our subject is beset with controversy at every juncture." "Realism will have taught us nothing, if it does not teach us how to tell the living realities from the verbal abstractions." Early in his career he defined the world in which he believed he worked, asserting that literature was distinctly an institution:

Like other institutions, [he wrote] like the church or the law, it cherishes a unique phase of human experience and controls a special body of precedents and devices; it incorporates a self-perpetuating discipline, while responding to the main currents of each succeeding period; it is continually accessible to all

the impulses of life at large, but must translate them into its own terms and adapt them to its peculiar forms. Once we have grasped this fact, we begin to perceive how art may belong to society and yet be autonomous within its own limits.

Harvard offered him an irresistible solution as he felt his way during a *wanderjahr* in Europe after graduation. It nominated him to be a Junior Fellow in the recently founded Society of Fellows. He accepted the appointment with pleasure and delight. He could have three years of post-graduate freedom, including an attractive tabu--he wasn't supposed to devote any of his time working for a graduate degree. I met him for the first time in 1937 toward the end of this period of his fellowship, which was renewed for a second three years. I was spending an autumn term at Harvard working on the Henry James papers deposited in the basement of the Widener and still controlled by the James family. Harry was then 25. I was five years older and had a Sorbonne doctorate. I enjoyed meeting this affable young scholar when I called on him in his rooms in Eliot House. He had an aristocratic air, that of a young and free grandee; he spoke with charm and precision, occasionally pausing and editing his words. His high-ceilinged study was filled with books floor to ceiling, and when he pulled some volume out to illustrate or offer a quotation he did so with a becoming tenderness. His eyes were attentive and closely observant. There was a suggestion of a mustache and he wore well-tailored suits. We discovered we had many subjects to share in common. I could describe the Joycean world I had known in Paris and the Hemingway world as well as the French professors of comparative literature, especially Fernand Baldensperger (who would later come to Harvard) and Paul Hazard. I too came from the Middle West, from Canada's Saskatchewan. During that fall term I saw Harry often and we became good friends. He introduced me to Ted Spencer, one of his former instructors, a buoyant witty young man whom I greatly liked but who died quite suddenly of a heart attack. I met the depressed F. O. Matthiessen who had not yet produced his big volume, *American Renaissance*. Harry Levin was critically reading certain chapters, as he would the manuscript of Matty's book on Eliot. I remember certain lively parties in Harry's rooms where I met for the first time Richard Blackmur, a self-educated critic, who was also destined to become a professor without a Ph.D.

What I liked about Harry Levin was his openness of spirit, his pluralism and complete freedom from pedantry, and the cant and hypocrisies of certain academics. In 1939 a sudden opening for a Shakespearian enabled him to move into Harvard's English Department in Warren House. A later critic, Burton Pike, in an appreciation of Levin's career, wrote in 1988 that "it could not have been easy for Harry Levin to be a Jewish professor at Harvard in his earlier period of service." Those were the years when English departments masked their anti-semitism by keeping "aliens" from teaching the literature of England and America. They were presumed to lack the proper rootedness. It was the time also when even Harvard's president, Abbott Lawrence Lowell, publicly voiced his belief that Jews would best be confined to a quota at Harvard and blacks assigned to a separate dormitory. "Immigrants, blacks and Jews"

were those singled out, if Lowell had his way. But he didn't. Pike adds "that Levin became a leading figure on the Harvard faculty is a tribute to his character and his talent, as well as to Harvard's capacity to change with the times."

I return to Levin speaking of the "pure luck" in his progress into education. Perhaps he said this because in entering Warren House he managed to bypass two of its proscriptions: the insistence upon a Ph.D. and the not altogether silent anti-semitism which excluded Jews from English departments. Concerning the latter, Levin wrote in his essay on Delmore Schwartz at Harvard: "He scented anti-semitism everywhere. Now having grown up in the Middle West, I was accustomed both to living in a Gentile community and to taking an outsider's position. Coming to Harvard, where "indifference" was a liberating watchword and *laissez-faire* was a social principle, I encountered little in the way of ethnic prejudice."

Harry Levin began by teaching Shakespeare and he never ceased to do so. However, his success with "the modern" led to his crowded courses on the *avant-garde*. Ultimately, he would be the first incumbent of the Irving Babbitt chair of Comparative Literature. Levin reorganized "comp. lit." studies at Harvard after the war, and headed the department for some years. He was involved in other educative tasks as well--the first committee on General Education, the Division of Modern Languages and, with his long interest in theatricals, he was a vigorous force in the Loeb Drama Center. He lectured constantly at other universities in America and was in wide demand at European seats of learning where he received honorary degrees and decorations, like the French Legion of Honor.

I encountered him on one occasion at Liege at a conference and went with him and his wife afterwards for a little tour in Holland. We put up in a baroque hotel of the Proustian era at Scheveningen next to The Hague where I remember Harry led us in search of Vermeer's little patch of yellow in his "View of Delft," singled out by Proust. I recall his flush of delight as we came on the rectangular canvas, and the feelings he vividly expressed as he described the death of Proust's Bergotte and the reiteration of "the little patch." He made it seem, in Vermeer's use of yellow, like a day of dazzling sunshine. On another occasion we met in Dublin and went in search of Joyce's Martello Tower and Leopold Bloom's ground floor dwelling in Eccles Street. Levin was always a lively travel companion.

I heard some of his lectures abroad. He had an admirable delivery, it had become a polished art and each paper had a perfection of form and elegance. We can recognize this in the papers he published among the 27 books he has left us, a rich humanistic heritage. Some of them, in their well-tempered perfection and clarity, as well as their inimitable tone of erudition and sweep of centuries, offer congruities and incongruities as objects of irony. Levin was a master-ironist: it pervades his writings and underlines his creative joy. We find these qualities even in such books as have label-titles, like his *Contexts of Criticism* or *Refractions*, and others with the light touch of his book on the nature of the comic spirit in the theatre, *Playboys and Killjoys*. His works on comparative literature deal with the evolution of genres, the nature of literary techniques, the ways in which the classics of one era permeate the works of other eras,

the impact of literary masters on one another and their ideas, aesthetic and philosophic. Harry knew enough languages to roam freely in works most persons never reach, and he had an extraordinary ability to see resemblances and differences, and the memory to bring them to us. Certain of his essays have been widely printed and translated. I think of his study of Hemingway's emotional language or the way in which he shows us how much of *Don Quixote* made its way into *Moby Dick*. These essays are the work of a poetic imagination and Harry can be considered an artist in the essay, in the tradition of Bacon and Montaigne. In his quasi-autobiographical *Memories of the Moderns* he is a subtle creator of brief lives, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, glimpses of W. H. Auden or William Carlos Williams, or his affectionate pictures of his European contemporaries, Erich Auerbach (who wrote *Mimesis*) and Leo Spitzer. Or he analyses with consummate feelings the life and suicide of F. O. Matthiessen and his conflicted homosexuality.

One might single out also a lively essay entitled "On the Dissemination of Realism," in which we travel with Harry Levin to late-Tito Yugoslavia, where in a great hall he expounds his ideas on "the real" and the romantic, offering such amusing sentences as this one: "It is impossible to imagine Tolstoy, Flaubert, Dickens and the other great realists being convened by a political party and voting how they should write thereafter." There were several Soviet culture envoys present and they challenged Harry to recognize that there was such a thing as "socialist realism." Harry's reply was: "Socialism is a creed, and realism is an art." Of all his books the longest and the most famous, *The Gates of Horn*, is his study of five French novelists and "the imposition of reality into romance," Homer's old distinction between the gates of horn and the gates of ivory. The book was twenty years in the making amid Levin's multitude of activities, including his writings on Shakespeare. The novelists he selected were Balzac, Stendhal, Flaubert, Zola and Proust. Flaubert somehow dominates the book in certain ways, in the way that he dominates his century in his refined artistry, and there are pages in *The Gates of Horn* reflecting the Flaubertian contagion. Yet in critical writing, Harry Levin may be called a master stylist in evocation of writers and the books they wrote. Let us briefly glance at a passage from his discussion of Flaubert's *L'education sentimentale*:

... Intermittent rain, the rain that beats through the cadences of Verlaine and Rimbaud, dampen the soul of Flaubert's protagonist. . . we apprehend the sight and smell of gaslight, the rumbling of the omnibuses, the sensations of wet pavements--and whenever he goes to the country--"a nostalgia for the boulevards." The pace and direction of the novel are set by his dilatory walks through the streets and accelerated by the march of history to the abortive climax of street fighting. . . Step back and squint: the ugliest negations of his subject assume a positive beauty of composition.

Harry Levin felt and possessed a kind of beauty of composition. His work is all of a piece from Greece to Rome, through the Renaissance and the Elizabethans, the Romantic movement and the coming of the symbolists and our subjective

modernism, from Freud's discoveries of the unconscious in dreams to James Joyce's "stream of consciousness." Levin wrote with admirable critical objectivity and serenity and allowed his erudition to play like sunlight over his evocations--pictures and scenes, lives and ideas, aesthetic, psychological, historical, the components of the Institution of Literature he had early envisaged. Each century offers us a few rare critics who survive and whose works belong to a continuity of culture. Harry Levin has such a distinct place in the century now drawing to its close.