

REMEMBERING HARRY

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My first recollection of Harry Levin goes back to my own sophomore year at Harvard College, when I enrolled in his course in the English drama from its origins down to the closing of the theaters in 1642. I was led to this by a prior interest in the subject, aroused in high school by a charismatic English teacher who had introduced his class to the whole length and breadth of English literature. Levin proved far more spellbinding and intellectually demanding than this precursor, so much so that by the time the year was out I knew that *this* was what I myself wished to spend the rest of my own days doing: reading, studying, and teaching the same exhilarating materials. In the following year I became his tutorial student, or, as the horrid Harvard jargon of the day then had it (and, I believe, still has it), his "tutee." In so doing I became acquainted also with his vivacious Russian wife, Elena, and his newborn daughter Marina.

Harry proved to be an exacting and at the same time a generous taskmaster, insisting on my fulfilling my tutorial obligations--all too easy to shirk in the relaxed Harvard of that day--while patiently helping me plug some of the gaps in my knowledge, as well as correcting the defects in my understanding, which were legion. He used to sit in a particular easy chair, his foot resting on a hassock, which he constantly waggled back and forth--a discharge of nervous energy--a mannerism my wife tells me I took to imitating in later years. With all the endless pains and immense hard work he poured into his scholarly enterprises, he never gave the impression of being in a hurry, partly no doubt because of the sureness of his grasp and the swiftness of his apprehension, which enabled him to seize in minutes what it might well have taken others weeks to arrive at, but partly due also to his bent for hospitality, which made it almost second nature for him to welcome a visitor at any time, to offer a drink, and to be ready with a sympathetic ear, along with, if appropriate, consolation or wise counsel.

He and his family were at that time living in a picturesque but ramshackle row house on Memorial Drive, facing the Charles River, alongside such temperamental neighbors as Delmore Schwartz, and there they would stay until after the Second World War, when Harry--exempt from the draft by virtue of a complaint then known as flat feet, which made marching impossible--having by that time become a tenured member of the Harvard Faculty, could acquire a multilevelled, capacious, almost labyrinthine New England house, only a few steps from the Yard, where he lived for the rest of his life, and where Elena still lives. The hazards of the house on Memorial Drive were illustrated with terrifying vividness by the way one of the freestanding bookcases, unanchored to any wall, which Harry, as was his lifetime wont, had packed so tightly with books that not a single chink or loose volume remained in it, one day collapsed without warning, its whole huge weight crashing onto the floor. Happily no one was under it at the time, and no one was hurt by it, but the imagined possible

consequences unnerved everyone who saw it, and underscored the fragility of the whole arrangement.

During the years on Memorial Drive, of course, Harry was only a junior member of the faculty, still on probation. He did already belong, however, to the Society of Fellows, an elite circle of chosen souls created by then President Lowell with the express purpose of breaking the stranglehold of the Ph.D. on the American university system, an attempt which, needless to say, failed utterly. Harry himself, with his prodigious erudition and wide-ranging brilliance, sailed through and past the need for any such formal certification, as did his older contemporary Howard Mumford Jones. The two maintained a kind of friendly rivalry as to which of them "knew more," but I don't think their competitiveness ever came to the point of an actual test. I dare say both Harry and Howard Jones were spared the distasteful requirement on a basis similar to that of their illustrious predecessor, George Lyman Kittredge, who, when asked why he himself had never obtained the doctorate, was reputed to have replied, "But *who* would examine me?"

In any event, Harry's unrivalled excellence as a teacher, and rapidly accumulating productivity as a scholar, enabled all such considerations to be waived. His lectures were marvels of richness, originality, and condensation, and they rapidly became famous for the way in which without a script in his hand he nevertheless managed to time them so that they reached their climax and foreordained conclusion just as the chapel bell was bonging out the hour, the signal for one class period to end and another to begin. This feat, I knew, did not come about by accident. Harry would actually rehearse his lectures aloud, in his room, the night before--one could hear him doing it through the adjoining walls--and the strain on him was such that, as he told me, he could never keep anything on his stomach but a glass of orange juice until after he had delivered the lecture of the day.

Harry had a marvellous sense of humor, quick to make jokes and quick to skewer the absurdities he saw about him. I remember one Monday morning when walking in Harvard Yard, I with him, he was accosted by Howard Jones, who congratulated him on an article he had had published the day before on the front page of the New York Times Sunday Book Review. This was the first time Harry happened to have occupied that coveted place, so in response to Jones's praise he said, "It makes me feel like a member of The World's Most Distinguished After-Shave Club"--alluding to a magazine advertisement that had been running for some weeks in which various celebrities, alleged to be regular users of such and such a well-known facial lotion, were said as a result to compose, to belong to, the Club in question. With this one witticism Harry exposed not only the trivial puffery of the advertisement in question, but also some of the hollowness and pretentiousness of the New York Times Sunday Book Review Section itself, and of those who regarded it as an oracle of serious criticism.

Somewhere in Harry's collected writings, if one looks for it, appears the following remark, alluding to Yvor Winters's noisy championing of insignificant poets like Elizabeth Daryush and Adelaide Crapsey, in whose poems nothing very much seems to be going on: "Yvor Winters," wrote Harry, parenthetically, "fiercely

recommending the tamest poets." This was the kind of paradoxical crisscross in which he delighted, and at which he excelled. Later on, in the days when it became common, even fashionable, for Ph.D. candidates to reverse tradition and do their research on living writers, Harry wrote, with similar paradoxical crisscross, that doctoral dissertations, "which used to be devoted to the exhumation of dead authors, now specialize in the inhumation of living ones." (Here and throughout, I hope it is understood, I am quoting entirely from memory. The quotation marks are not to be taken as part of a system of formal reference, but mean simply that "As best I can remember, Harry wrote or said this.")

Another joke he and I shared was not of Harry's making, but had to do with his older colleague, Professor James Buell Munn. Munn had been brought to Harvard from NYU, it was wickedly rumored, because of the magnificence of his personal library, which required the regular services of a paid graduate student, and his enormous personal fortune, in the hope that he would bequeath it all to Harvard. I myself had in my Freshman year taken Professor Munn's course in the Bible, and I remember him as a sweetly solemn, misty-eyed Christian, unworldly in his manner as true Christians proverbially aimed to be. A certain student of Munn's was in serious trouble with the college deans, who when they questioned the Professor, received the following enlightening answer from him: "I told them I thought the boy was *meshuggah*." The effect of this colloquial Yiddishism, coming from such a source, struck both Harry and me as so irresistibly comic that we laughed till our sides hurt--hence the indelible imprint it has left on my memory.

These are happy memories, and these were on the whole happy times, but they were not untouched by tragedy. First there were the sudden, premature deaths of two of Harry's closest friends and associates. One of them, Theodore Spencer, keeled over from a massive heart attack. The other, F. O. Matthiessen ("Mattie"), leaped to his death from the top floor of one of the most sordid hotels in Boston. Not many years later came a third death--in a senseless auto accident--that of Renato Poggioli, whom Harry had been instrumental in bringing to Harvard as one of the cornerstones of the evolving Comparative Literature Program. During those same years occurred the mysterious defection, which Harry professed to find all but incomprehensible--of his admired friend Charles Singleton, the eminent Italianist and Dante scholar, whose bitterness reached such a point that he resigned from Harvard altogether, taking a job elsewhere and (I believe) severing all further connection with Harvard for the rest of his life. Finally there was the road accident in which Harry's daughter, Marina, then a child of nine or so, received injuries that may possibly have cast its shadows far into the future. In short, along with the joys of teaching literature, making discoveries about it, publishing increasingly powerful books on the subject, and building up comparative literature as a major university discipline, Harry also fell victim to a more than usually large number of blows from life, fate, and personal conflict.

I don't propose to speak much about his career as a scholar, the essentials of which are familiar. He started as a rebel and Young Turk (so called by John Crowe Ransom), who agonized all night long over whether to accept the initial appointment

being offered him by Harvard, and ended by becoming a pillar of the institution, indeed its ambassador and spokesman to the rest of the world.

But certain constants in the picture strike me. One is the unerringness of Harry's taste, the sureness with which he blazed trail after trail that others would follow--the studies of Joyce, of Marlowe, of nineteenth and twentieth century French realist fiction--and the stream of reviews and articles on particular topics that poured from him, each one a completely worked out and deeply pondered view of some aspect of the literature he wished to explicate. More than once, when I asked him what he was working on, what his current projects were, he would answer that "like Jimmy Durante, I've got a million of 'em." Another constant was the inventive way he promoted his convictions about literature into the classroom. The course I have already mentioned, on English drama from its origins until the closing of the theaters, had as part of its announced purpose "to put Shakespeare in his place"--in other words to read Shakespeare as a member of a larger cultural community, as part of the same movement that also produced his most significant contemporaries in the theater--Marlowe, Jonson, Webster, and the rest. On the occasion of his giving the same course during my own graduate years, he started the term, standing at the rostrum, with two words ringingly sounded: "Merry England!" before going on to develop a Frazeresque and (I believe) by current notions a largely discredited view of the anthropological origins of the drama, for which he offered as convincing--even as electrifying--an account as it would have been possible to make.

Similarly, his course in Proust, Joyce, and Mann constituted a close look at those three pioneers of the earlier twentieth century, in which he exemplified what he meant by his chosen discipline of Comparative Literature--not only through frequent illuminating reference to the actual language of *Ulysses*, *A la Recherche du temps perdu*, and *Der Zauberberg*, but by designing the final examination so that a student had either to deal with Proust or Mann in the original, or else be expected to discuss on a level of high competence some especially intractable passage from Joyce. The course thus bore almost no relation to what often passes for comparative literature in colleges these days--an assemblage of bits and pieces from literatures other than English, all helpfully translated, or, as one might say, pretranslated, so that no linguistic equipment is needed, and only a minimum of intellectual effort.

Another constant, it seems to me, is what I would call the essential healthiness of Harry's outlook, his appeals to common sense and sound judgment, his absence of crotchiness or eccentricity. Despite Harry's undeniable brilliance, the familiar catchphrase "brilliant but unsound," so often heard in the academic marketplace, would in his case have been totally inappropriate. All his formidable intellectual apparatus was brought to bear on the elucidation, the enrichment of understanding, of literature, in all its aspects. There was no crankiness or riding of hobbyhorses anywhere in it--even if, as his students came to notice, one particular book, *Don Quixote*, seemed to play the role in his mind of King Charles's Head, after the character in Dickens who could not keep that mesmerizing topic out of his conversation.

As the years passed, and I myself came to live in California, we would sometimes not see each other for months, or even (though this was rare) for years, so that my memories of that epoch are necessarily sketchy. But the occasional visit (on either coast) was always invigorating. At Wellfleet, on Cape Cod, where he and his family summered every year, and ultimately acquired their own vacation house, the Levins belonged to a colony composed mainly of literary intelligentsia, with which they regularly congregated on beaches, and (later on in the day) at cocktail parties. I have a vivid memory of sitting on the sand with Edmund Wilson and his last wife, Elena, referred to by Harry as "echt Deutsch," who had the remarkable power of being able to change her clothes completely while sitting on the beach, in full view, but without ever showing an inch of her skin. I remember too that as a graduate student myself at the time, I found myself encouraged by Harry to enter into debate with the formidable Edmund Wilson over the virtues of Thomas Middleton, about whose plays Wilson had made slighting remarks, as he was later to do in print about Ben Jonson, despite the fact that he and Harry had laughed together over Jonson in their private moments.

And I recall an evening at the house of Francis Biddle, the (perhaps former) U.S. Attorney General, at which, as a parlor game, each guest was to read aloud a poem of his/her own choosing. Harry, on that occasion, chose Prospero's speech from Act 5 of *The Tempest*, beginning "Ye Elves of Brooks, Hills, standing Lakes, and Groves"--a magnificent speech, which Harry read magnificently, making all those who followed him in the game seem inert and lifeless. That reminded me--it still reminds me--of how regularly, in his courses on the drama he would seize on a passage to read aloud, a passage always aptly chosen for representing the play in question, and how with remarkable histrionic flair, yet without the least trace of hamming, he would proceed to bring it to life in his reading.

As I look back over the many years of our acquaintance, one scene, one site, dominates my memory: that of the kitchen in the house on Kirkland Place, where Harry would sit, as autocrat of the breakfast table, in "his" chair (it looked like an easy chair but was in fact, I later discovered, rather uncomfortable), reading from and commenting--ironically, cuttingly, or approvingly, as the case may have been--on what the Boston daily *Globe* or *Traveller* was saying that day, while Elena made coffee, and visitors would join the conversation as best they could. And this scene would be part of a longer and larger scene, that of the streams of visitors that over the years flocked to both their houses, at all hours of the day and night, as it seemed, drawn by longstanding or newly acquired friendship, by Harry's personal magnetism and the warmth of his hospitality, as well as by professional involvement. Of these visitors many were illustrious, many others inconsequential in the world's eye, many of them folk he and Elena were befriending, who had a thousand stories to tell and a thousand problems to solve. In retrospect I think of them as constituting a vast family, the family of the friends of Harry. A typical early memory, from the days on Memorial Drive, is that of being introduced to Harry's precocious young colleague W. J. Bate, whose developing career was for Harry an endless delight, and in whose triumphs he took a profound avuncular satisfaction. On another occasion, again on Memorial Drive just

after the war, I recall Edmund Wilson excitedly proclaiming his discovery of Benjamin Britten's opera, *Peter Grimes*, which had just been shown for the first time in America at (I think) Tanglewood. In later years, on Kirkland Place, the multitudes of visitors, of former students and current ones, of old friends and new acquaintances, of relatives and droppers in, could become a traffic jam almost reaching the point of gridlock, with Harry, unruffled in the middle of it, taking the keenest interest in all the details of all the lives being passed in review, and the marvellous Elena endlessly caught up in the human interest stories that seemed to fly to her like particles to electrified amber.

These are memories I will cherish as long as there is breath in me. As I take my leave of them for the moment, I say farewell once more also to my old friend and mentor, whose loss has made the world seem so shrunken, so much smaller a place than it used to be.