

## ON HARRY LEVIN

NEIL RUDENSTINE

*President of Harvard University*

I'm here today to say some words about Harry, mainly in my role as one of his countless students. I first saw him out not long after I came to Harvard in 1960, not long after Oxford already focused on Elizabethan or Renaissance literature. I needed a dissertation advisor, who would not only be open-minded and patient, but also indulgent. Because, while I was quite sure I wanted to write on the poetry of Sir Philip Sidney, I was very far from having any particular topic in mind. I only knew that Sidney's work interested me and that his poetry seemed to me to be very important. To my astonishment, that was enough for Harry. He immediately agreed to supervise me purely on "spec," as we might say, more or less "sight unseen." It all happened very quickly and graciously and I came away from my meeting with him almost wishing that he had said "no" instead of "yes." For after all, if he was willing to take a chance on me, that meant I had no choice but to deliver. And at that moment, deliverance in any tangible shape or form seemed very far off indeed. As events turned out, he was the ideal supervisor. He would listen very attentively to my rather disconnected perceptions and ideas with his head slightly tilted to one side and an expression that seemed to indicate real curiosity on his part. He always gave me the reassuring impression that I might actually say something interesting and more or less intelligent, and he seemed hopeful on one's behalf, hopeful that the conversation on any given day would be enlivened by a new insight or remark that was worth remembering. Now the chance of achieving that result was of course very remote, since Harry had read virtually everything, and since his own mind had already raised far beyond the edges of any literary space that I was even just beginning to explore. There were certainly not many, if any, surprises that one could ever hope to offer him. His own advice, meanwhile, was always tentative rather than prescriptive. There were none of those sudden showers of lists of articles or books that one was told to run out and consult. Of course it was important to be reading widely and learning everything possible about the Elizabethan period and beyond. But there was always the conviction--which Harry communicated strongly, so strongly--that the poetry itself (in my case Philip Sidney's poetry) mattered first and mattered last. And that if one stayed with the poetry long enough, it would sooner or later yield up its secrets. Looking back, I can now see how his entire way of teaching and advising was so consistent with his own approach to literature and criticism. In his essays and books, he could be systematic, impress an analytical point and argument when he felt it was necessary. But more than anything, he was guided namely by his extraordinary sensibility, by those wonderful antennae, always scanning and picking up the least flicker of any significant literary vibration on the horizon. Those qualities, so intuitive and finely tuned, made him the best possible supervisor for a young and uncertain student like myself. They also ensured, almost by definition, that there would be no "Levin school" of criticism or followers, no obvious legacy in terms of a transferable critical methodology or apparatus, because no one could really

emulate him. How does one emulate an original and unerring sensibility? He wrote with un-self-conscious elegance and style, and that, too, precluded emulation. So we're left in the end with his essays and books, literary criticism that are in fact unique, because they are so clearly the mark of this particular mind and man: work that continues to stimulate us with its learning, its stunning insights, its sudden *aperçu*, its bright illuminations. In 1974, after Edmund Wilson's death, Harry wrote an eloquent tribute to Wilson. Toward the end of the essay, he quoted two couplets that Wilson had once composed and sent to a number of friends in the form of witty, but also serious, New Year's resolutions and advice. Reading these lines, one can see why Harry plucked them out of all of Wilson's writings, and why they might have had a special meaning for Harry himself, because they do seem to embody so much of his own character, his own attitudes, his own perspective on both life and literature: "Beware of dogmas backed by faith. Steer clear of conflicts unto death. Keep going. Never stoop. Sit tight. Read something luminous at night."

JAN ZIOLKOWSKI

*Chairman of the Department of Comparative Literature  
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It's been more than four months, since we heard the news and gasped either aloud or within, more than four months since we read the obituaries and collected our own private thoughts and tears. For me, it's been more than four months in which I've walked by an office I associated with Harry Levin, and I've not made out his form through the glass window. But now those months have passed, and we're here to put together the silhouettes that we carry, that we will always carry in our hearts and minds. Now we come together as students, as students and colleagues, as colleagues and neighbors, as friends, as family. Although we may wipe at a tear or two, we're also here to share a smile or two, and many memories. One memory that I hold dear comes from the rich folklore of the Department of Comparative Literature in which Harry Levin played so central a role. According to the lore, a graduate student named Bob Tracey was once studying anxiously for his general examinations. Apparently his anxiety was contagious because his wife had a dream in which she heard their doorbell ring, and opened the door to discover before her professors Renato Poggioli and Harry Levin, dressed in workman's clothes, wearing overalls and lugging bags of tools. In her vision, Mrs. Tracey called out to her husband: "Bob, the men are here to compare the literature."

Today we will not compare literature, but rather notes on a person who filled many of us, not only with awe, but also with affection--a person whose departure has deprived us of a paragon and a friend. Thinking of Harry as a plumber is preposterously incongruous, and yet he had in him more than a little of the builder and

architect. Maybe in a metaphoric sense, he *was* the plumber but he laid his pipes not in the walls but in his books, in his institutions, and in the people whose lives he touched by his example and his humanity.

You will now hear from four individuals of the many who were affected by Harry Levin. Together, this quadrumvirate will recall to us the outlines of the complex man we seek to memorialize. The first is Neil Rubinstein, president of our college, humanist, and former student of Harry Levin. The second is Donald Fanger, Harry Levin Professor of Literature, former student, former colleague. The third is Walter Jackson Pitt, long time colleague of Harry Levin in the Department of English, and to complete our picture will be John Kenneth Galbraith, whom we are to think of today not as an economist but as a neighbor of Harry Levin's. That four such different notabilities should be drawn together on this occasion evidences the extraordinary breadth and vitality to the person we are here to remember.

DONALD FANGER

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He was extraordinary, "exceeding [as the American Heritage Dictionary defines that word] the ordinary degree, amount, or extent." As a mind, a reader, a writer, a teacher, a complex and constant presence. A Harvard presence, whom we celebrate today in the difficult realization that this is Harvard's first October without him, or at least, without the promise of his return, since 1928. Since Harry died, I've been consulting my own memories and others', and I've been rereading him, not only the major books, but the remarkable uncollected pieces from his earliest years, loaded with common sense and uncommon learning, witty, elegant--that unavoidable word in any discussion of any aspect of Harry--written with precocious authority and a dazzling range of reference, where mastery of detail complements memorable overviews and irrepressible high spirits play over an underlying seriousness. Here he is at age 25, reviewing Georges Lemaître's four French novelists in the *Partisan Review* for May 1938:

The final canon of French academic criticism is the ability to convert every living figure it touches into something illustrious, immortal, worthy to be commemorated by the name of the street, but unreservedly dead. Anyone who has ever written anything is guaranteed under the culture of dispensation of the Third Republic his inalienable right to a *vie*, an *oeuvre*, and a *pensée*. The *vie* and the *oeuvre* tend, in critical practice, to get glowingly muddled so that the author is credited with the deeds of his characters and the books are viewed as chapters in his autobiography. But the *pensée*, when everything else

has been abstracted from it, remains electric, inviolate and, as we are so often told--French.

"The French [he explains] expect a novelist to have a position as we expect him to have a pose." And then, after demolishing the second-rate Frenchness of M. Lemaître's scheme, he goes on to reconceive the book in more serious terms. Proust would be better followed not by Gide, Morand, and Giraudoux--"Gide is not primarily a novelist [he writes] any more than Rousseau or Lawrence; he is a moral force, a literary influence, a voice in the wilderness"--but, he suggests (and gives reasons), by other more and less familiar figures, Romain, André Malraux, Roger Martin du Gard, Drieu la Rochelle, Céline, Jean Guéhenno. He takes a similarly bracing and synoptic approach to the English, before settling down to cases in his admiring review of Orwells's *Dickens, Dali and Others*, in the *New Republic* for May 1946, which opens:

English critics, by circumscribing their definition of culture, have missed a great deal. Inheriting their criteria from Walter Pater, an Oxford don, or Matthew Arnold, a school inspector, they have confined themselves to the higher manifestations of art. They have dealt more effectually with the elegiac past than with the distracting present. Until quite recently they have hesitated to acknowledge that heaven and earth contain more things than fall within the academic curriculum. They have never quite outgrown the peculiar tutelage of an educational system which bases itself on the coalition between intellectual superiority and social snobbery. Thus, T. S. Eliot can impose his opinions with a schoolmaster's authority, while William Empson exerts his perceptions with a schoolboy's precocity. Even Cyril Connolly, though morbidly conscious of the obsolescent institutions behind him, cannot say goodbye to all that.

With more time at my disposal, I could show him doing the same thing in these years with German literature, with American literature, in fact with any of the many subjects he addresses. He had done his homework early and with an intimidating thoroughness. That was one lesson he passed on to his students by example: "Try to know everything about your subject, not just the key works, but the complete works, and not just the texts but the contexts." The philology that dominated academic work in literature in his student years was ripe for replacement. I quote from a polemical piece in *The Southern Review* of 1941:

Results of this sort continue to pile up in that metaphysical vacuum where the extreme of detachment meets the vanishing point of relevance [the twenty-eight-year old Harry wrote impatiently]. The equipment of scholarship is useless without some criterion of significance, some sense of proportion that can only be derived from experience. If the academic ideal of objectivity still means anything, [he writes], it should mean not the indifference of the absentminded professor, but the alertness of a trained mind in perceiving the broader

implications of immediate problems. To establish communication with the past requires a vivid sense of the present. It is time for a truce between pedants and aesthetes [he concludes]: they have too much to learn from each other.

If he lacked a method, as some have observed, it was because he saw literature as too complex to yield to skeleton keys. He employed many methods, selecting and fashioning them to be successive tasks at hand.

I first met Harry, "beheld" may be the better word, in 1956, when I arrived at Harvard as a graduate student in the Comparative Literature Department he and Renato Poggioli were infusing with a new vitality. That fall he was offering his legendary course on Proust, Joyce, and Mann for the last time. The impression was permanent. It would be deepened and complicated in later years, but never subject to fundamental revision. Here was this tall, impeccably groomed and tailored man, always in a suit--more informal dress relatively speaking was reserved for seminars which he regarded as quasi-collegial workshops--employing diction whose like I'd never heard in a classroom before, emitting sentences of astonishing formal complexity, in a commandingly rich baritone, while gazing out the window to his right or forward apparently at the point where the ceiling joined the back wall. "Better," he wrote later, "to risk talking over the heads of the less prepared than to risk talking down to the best." And leaving always one slow dramatic beat between the rhetorical flourish of his *finale* and the tolling of the bell from Memorial Church. Marbles of elegance, those lectures were at the same time memorable as essays in strategic perspective.

To confer with him in his office and be the addressee of the same improbably well-formed sentences, the recipient of commensurately formal courtesies could be a daunting experience, particularly before the realization of his underlying shyness set in. That realization actually didn't help a lot, the mix of shyness and authority could make his occasional silences and even his friendly questions seem freighted with implication, could make him a mirror, and a magnifying mirror, for your own insecurities. His reserve invited imputation. He liked what the Russians called "broad souls," spontaneous theatrical types, but graduate school did not exactly encourage those qualities, even if they were latent in some of us, and I suspect that the majority of his students, the male students at least, tried with fluctuating success, to match his own formality, slipping sometimes into affectation and periodically--this is really as you see autobiographical--into the fear that we were falling too far short (because some falling short was inevitable) of his standards or his expectations, and so becoming candidates for a place on his disappointments list. Strict emulation, after all was out of the question. His innate gifts and his athletic deployment of them made that clear.

He read with phenomenal rapidity and retention, turned papers in theses, chapters as well as poems, plays, novels, treatises. He was a prompt and indefatigable correspondent. He was in his own words "above all, a learner and a discernor" on a scale that could only provoke bemused admiration. He was, at the same time, a loyal mentor taking pride in the careers of his former students and manifesting a sustained interest in their lives. In a house on Kirkland Place or the other house on Boundbrook

Island, he and Elena provided warm and constant, unflinching hospitality to generations of students, colleagues, and visitors. In those settings, the talk, while it seldom became small, could turn informal, veering into reminiscence and gossip, and moving Harry on occasion to beam with pleasure and amusement so intensely, and withal so shyly, as to make it clear that this was his equivalent of another's belly laugh.

Summary is inadequate to indicate all the facets and dimensions of Harry's presence, and extended citation is impossible here. I would, if I could, talk at length about the wit that seasons his writing from first to last: like the passing mention in the Joyce book of "Thomas Merton, the loquacious Trappist;" or his characterization of the later work of Henry Miller as "leaves of grass gone to seed;" or the not unfriendly comment on a colleague's method when he tells us that "he subscribes to neither relativism nor absolutism, he seems to opt for an excluded middle, to promise us that he will not be swerved by partiality on the one hand, or by impartiality on the other." Similarly, I would, if I could, catalogue the many places in his writing where, characterizing others, the words apply to his own case as well. A few examples. This on Joyce: "But he cannot be included in any school, he was a school by himself." On Malraux's style in Harry's first published review: "Intense and supple, capable now of bare directness and again of sudden ranges of suggestion." On Irving Babbit: "Those to whom the names of certain writers were no more than names, so no more than name dropping in his majestic role calls. It took a textual knowledge approaching his own to verify his juxtapositions and linkages." On Leo Spitzer: "His method was his very exceptional self." On Babbit again: "Though his cause seemed a losing one to his opponents, it is not yet lost a generation afterward. On the contrary, their causes, precisely because they seemed so up-to-date, have dated more than his old-fashioned virtues. If he dwelt in a library tower, it had windows which looked out and down on a clear and broad perspective." And quoting T.S. Eliot on Babbit: "To have once been his pupil was to remain always in that position and to be grateful for, in my case, a very much qualified approval." And finally, quoting Henry Adams: "A teacher affects eternity. He can never tell where his influence stops."

Harry's last CV lists twenty three books dedicated to him. If grateful acknowledgements were listed, the number would be many times that. He welcomed the independence of his students, declaring: "It would give me no satisfaction whatever to believe that I have set my stamp on any student, or that our departments of English or Comparative Literature could be categorized as schools of thought." But of course he did set his stamp on all of us by offering fundamental perspectives on what we do, and through example more than precept, standards of intellectual curiosity, commitment, and seriousness that we might try to make our own. I do not mean these generalities in a *pro forma* way. They point to bedrock grounds for accomplishment and for lasting gratitude. In recent years, buffeted by ailments he did not complain (but he did grow gentler), his thanks for visits were suffused with touching warmth, his face began to change remarkably; it became more earthy. When he grew his beard last winter he took on the look, but not the speech, of a grizzled tugboat captain. The last time I saw him, in Mount Oberon Hospital, shortly before his death, the visual

impression was overwhelming, just as Elena had reported. The flowing hair, together with the beard and the questioning gaze, did give him the look of a Don Quixote as the romantics conceived him: beautiful (the eyes particularly), clear and shiny--the whole effect spiritual and serene. Lucidity seemed to approach and recede--it was never clear that he recognized me--but as I got up to leave, he said: "Thank you for coming and for your concern. It's been very strange. Lots of jumps. Hardly credible." It's hardly credible that he should have grown old and, now, that he should be gone. In the introduction to *Memories of the Moderns*, he reminds us that "the word contemporary in its literal meaning signifies being temporary together." In so many unspecifiable ways, for so many of us, he made "being temporary together" a rich and privileged thing. Not easily articulated, not soon forgotten.

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My acquaintance with Harry began in 1940, when I showed up for my Ph.D. oral exam. At that time there were five examiners, and when I went in, I saw four older professors and then a neatly dressed young man. I later found out he was only twenty eight, six years older than myself. I thought he was by far the best of the five examiners. With the other people I often gave very vague answers on subjects that I thought I knew a lot about. But, for Harry, I found myself giving very good answers on subjects I hadn't realized that I knew at all. And whenever I'd stumble a bit with the other people, then with just a few words which he'd gently insert, I'd find myself suddenly back on track. Soon afterwards, he and Elena would have me to their house, and whether we talked about formal or stylistic matters--such as versification (on which I was writing a thesis), or about the history of ideas (then coming in as a new subject and one toward which I was now turning), or the sociology of literature, relation of literary forms to social history, the growth of literacy, the reading public and so on--in every case it was like what an ancient Greek epigram said of Plato, that "in whatever direction you went you found him returning on his way back." He was always there before you, and yet never obtrusively, but with the subtlety of true generosity as a form of what Keats called "a greeting of the spirit." If I speak of his association with the English Department, it's because, first of all, over the fifty four years I knew him, that was where I knew him best, except for the way in which he and Elena virtually took in, as a member of the family, a young scholar who had been rather early orphaned and had worked his way through college and the graduate school in the Union kitchens, and also as an assistant janitor there and at the library. Yes, the Union of beloved memory, now returning to us more prominently, every square foot of which I cleaned daily, until, as Harry liked to say, he deposited me like a baby on the steps of Warren House, a rather overage baby, I should say, of twenty-two, and which, until Harry and

Douglas Bush intervened and viewed me as outside the pale--Harry said that was because of my clothes, which were of course all I could afford--even the old left wing of the Department, though theoretically--I should say, even vociferously--espousing the working man, really knew little of him at first hand. Harry would like to say, quoting *King Lear* to Mad Tom, "You were the thing itself." And had you only appeared thirty years later when the new left wing and the students had adopted what they thought of as the working man's costume, you'd have been welcomed with open arms. It was certainly a great new experience and changed my life. The second reason for touching on his association with the English Department is that though Harry virtually founded Comparative Literature here, and was one of the pioneers in the subject, he often said that his primary home at Harvard was inevitably the English Department, whose long history he knew in such detail, better than anybody else, ever since he had come as a freshman in 1928, up to the end when he would have weekly meetings with the other emeriti. His famous early courses, subsuming French, German, Italian, and classical writers were supplemented by his large courses in the Elizabethan drama, and especially his great course in Shakespeare, often with five hundred students which he alternated with Gwen Evans. He was one of the three or four best lecturers on literary subjects I've ever heard. Among his many writings, about a third were comparative, or as he preferred himself to call it, "general literature." Another third were in literary theory and criticism as a whole, and another third in English and American literature. And this is hardly a place for a bibliography, of course, but I add that the range of what he covered in English and American literature, so authoritatively and with brilliance, went from the Elizabethan to the present day.

By the fifties, Harry had become a legend, and in several ways. He knew personally most of the modern writers from T.S. Eliot on. And in his home he and Elena would have, as Don Fanger says, faculty and students come to meet them. His lectures, given so beautifully phrased, would conclude exactly one second before the bell tolled the hour. And so ready minded was he--with epigrams falling like snow in January from him--that those who didn't know him, especially from other universities, were in advance a little afraid. They'd heard stories of his remarkable wit and, for the moment, were tongue-tied till his warm geniality taught and reassured them.

And so the years passed as his prestige and his writings accumulated. At Harvard his helpful influence was enormous, for he really knew the history of Harvard: how this or that had been tried over the generations, and then often retried when people had forgotten about it, and with what result. He knew the history of Harvard, I think, better than anyone except his old friend Samuel Eliot Morrison. And the CP administrations were especially eager to hear from him, and rightly trusted his opinion. With our loss of him, I think of what one of Samuel Johnson's friends, a statesman of the time, said of Johnson: "He has left a place that no one can even begin to fill up. There is no one else, no one who can completely put you in mind of him." Archie McLeash, in his memorial for Kenneth Murdoch said that "when we think of the greatness of Harvard, we think especially of the long succession of the famous dead--eleven generations of them now--who carry the living on their shoulders." And we



ourselves can now think of Harry, as well, restored in memory and ideal to his bright self, secure among his peers and companions of the many generations of Harvard, part forever of the greatness he so loved.

JOHN KENNETH GALBRAITH  
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. . . will tell, and I'm now indeed told, of Harry Levin's superb scholarship, and how wonderfully it was communicated to his students, the gratitude and affection with which they and his colleagues responded. And there has been mention of the clear English, the clear informed English of his books and other writings, and how it endures and will endure. I was among the many rewarded by Harry Levin's scholarship. That I must assert, even though I must be careful not to exaggerate. Over the many years I never went to a Shakespeare production, without reading Harry's commentary first. And in any ensuing comment, I always protected my scholarly reputation by making sure that it accorded with Harry's view. But today I speak of Harry Levin, not as a scholar, but as a friend: a beloved friend for a full half century. He was nearly our closest neighbor for almost all that time. Harry and Elena were the two people in Cambridge over the years of whom we saw the most. Harry Levin was a wonderfully kind person, quiet but clear of speech. He informed but he never attempted to instruct. He was alert to the world's scene, to that of his community, and most of all, to this university, to Harvard. In the manner of the best of professors over the centuries, he regarded his institution, he regarded, in this case Harvard, as an extension of his own life. For it he felt an immediate and compelling personal responsibility. This responsibility, he conscientiously and thoughtfully discharged. There were limits to our common interests, of course. Over the fifty years of our friendship, I do not recall that we ever discussed economics. Many will take this today as a mark of a fully civilized man. My mind returns to the many evenings of general conversation with Harry and Elena: at their house, our house, at the annual Christmas Day party at the Levins and the visits on Cape Cod. All were occasions of sheer joy, and all were times of wide-ranging, interesting talk.

Harry could also be protective of his friends. I remember a time particularly, when we were visiting on Cape Cod and gathered after dinner with the great literary critics of our time: Edmund Wilson, no less, his then wife Mary McCarthy, others lost to memory, and perhaps to fame. The topic for the evening, as I roughly recall, was teleological aspects of the lower-level literary criticism, or some such. I was forced to maintain a deep, some would say, unnatural silence. Once I was asked my view. I replied, after some thought, that I needed more time for reflection. As we were leaving, Harry, who had also limited his participation, congratulated me warmly on my wise restraint. As I say, he was a very thoughtful, but very rewarding, friend. We say

often on these occasions as today that we are gathered to celebrate the life of a great figure of our community, our university, and our time. That is wholly appropriate. But let us also allow ourselves a moment of sadness, a quiet tear for what has now passed. With the death of Harry Levin, our life will never be so rich again. A gap will always remain. We will fill it partly by memory, but that will never be enough. Therefore let me say a final word on our loss, on the sadness we all here feel: this is deep and it will long endure.

HENRY HATFIELD  
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My friendship with Harry Levin covered over sixty years, from 1928 to 1994. In September of thirty-two we met on the Chicago to Boston train. We were both sub-freshman, delighted with the prospect of becoming real Harvard "men" in a few days. It soon emerged that we had been successful high school pupils, he in Minneapolis, I in Evanston. Almost immediately I sensed that he was more outstanding than I, in activities as well as studies. Even as a dancer he claimed superiority. (Neither of us was outstanding in that art.)

In our freshman year we became better acquainted. Both of us were impressed with History 1, an extremely large course. It deserved its reputation, and we awaited, with others, the spectacle of Frisky Merriman knocking the hats off the heads of ill-mannered fellows. In those days, most students wore hats and suits rather than sweaters.

To fulfill the requirement in athletics, we were asked to walk twenty-five miles a week, since neither Harry nor I could be called athletic. And thus every Saturday afternoon we took a ten-mile hike. Long talks with Harry made the peripatetic experience on the whole a joy.

The ensuing years bred familiarity with Harvard, certainly not contempt. Harry concentrated in English, I in Classics; then, basically ignorant of Hitler, I shifted to German. Both of us took many Classics courses; the department was superb. I had almost two concentrations; Harry could be general and specific at once.

At some point in 1932-22 Harry launched the prospect of Harvard students putting on a Greek tragedy, in Greek; Sophocles' *Philoctates* was chosen. The Classics Department supported the project. The drama was serious but with a happy ending. To our surprise, the project succeeded beyond our hopes: spectators from all over; excellent music by Elliot Carter, praise in the *Boston Transcript*. With part of the proceeds, we celebrated with wine furnished by the "Athens Olympia." "Wine, dear boy, and truth" -- a truly Athenian sentiment.

Shortly after graduation we took a month's bicycle tour of England. We went from Plymouth up the the Lake Country, then across to the North Sea just south of the Roman Wall. The last "lap" south by great cathedrals like York and Lincoln to the "other" Cambridge. Finally we took the train to London and sold our faithful bikes.

Harry's versatility is shown by his learning, scope, literary style, and equally important, his great kindness to students, from freshman to candidates for the Ph.D. I would add that in his quiet way he was a leader in many ways, not all of them academic. He resuscitated comparative literature at Harvard, combining the demand for excellence with a striking kindness.