

Tom Edwards – A Tribute from a Student

Probably for everyone there are a handful of people without whom the course of one's own life can't be imagined. Tom Edwards is among this handful for me. This is true on the most practical level—I was his student at the University of California, Riverside, and in my last year he told me to go to graduate school at Harvard and study with Reuben Brower. The advice (and his help carrying it out) was a determining event of my life.

But Tom has been important to me on a deeper level. The first course I had with him was a year-long sophomore survey course, "The English Literary Tradition." He mocked the title and the possibility of such a "survey." Nonetheless, what he gave us embodied (in the most self-effacing yet indelible way) the idea that thinking about and talking about literature was an activity—a *project*—congruent with the ambition and seriousness, the moral, psychic generosity, of the works we were studying. In other words he communicated that there *was* a tradition of discourse that mattered, that could absorb the whole of a human being's largest, truest energies. For a farmer's son from Bakersfield, California, crazy for art, listening to Tom Edwards talk about literature hour after hour, from "On My First Son" through *Antony and Cleopatra* and "The Collar" to *Howards End* (punctuated at intervals by extremely skeptical comments everywhere on our first papers, demonstrating that not every bright phantasmagoric projection onto the words of the text was justifiable, or interesting), created horizon where there had only been murk, made ground on which to stand. I had had an excellent freshman composition course (in which we read *Paradise Lost*), but in Tom's course I learned to read, to pay attention to the details of a poem and to begin to find a language for talking about the experience of reading that allowed one to measure that experience against the experience of others: other readers and the authors themselves. The seriousness, the moral generosity he asked of literature we knew were possible because he embodied them. (Perhaps this is the central gift a teacher can give a student.)

Frank Bidart
Wellesley College