

On Tom Edwards

For nearly half my life, and over half of his, Tom Edwards and I have been close associates in teaching—colleagues much of that time at Rutgers—and in the editing over the last ten years of *Raritan*, so named at Tom's suggestion. By now, and with the shared experience, besides, of having at roughly the same time been undergraduates at Amherst and then graduate students in English at Harvard, we're old and trusting friends, at an age when the reiterated "let's get together for dinner" has become less a statement of intention than of affection. Only after I set out to write these few pages did it occur to me that despite all this proximity I'm able to recall only a few moments that seem in any way vividly to represent him. He has his share of what I consider oddities, none exceptionally colorful: he seems always to be lighting a cigarette though I've never heard him cough; for a large man he takes very small steps; when you're invited to his house he can disappear into the kitchen for long periods, there studiously to work out one or another of the recipes he discovers in books. Some of these discoveries should never have been published, like the halibut poached in red wine served one very hot evening to me and his wife Nancy. Both Tom and Nancy show a reticent and loving pride in their grown children, Sarah and John, and take pleasure in the big and beautiful house and grounds they now have all to themselves, except when sick parents are being cared for.

As a teacher Tom is among the most dutiful and revered members of a very large and complex department. Over many decades he hasn't once taken advantage of the seniority and distinction that could easily allow him reprieve from the more tedious committees, or especially from teaching, sometimes chairing, the basic courses in close reading. Intended in some cases for sophomores, in others for incoming graduate students, these courses require more office hours and more grading of papers than any others except freshman composition. He writes substantial comments on every paper and in ink. To the more quickly exasperated like myself, who depend on pencil and erasure, this particular practice of his evinces an almost unnatural evenness of temper and no small degree of self-assurance. At *Raritan*, we both read everything that Suzanne Hyman, the managing editor, hands on to us, and I don't recall ever disagreeing with his negative assessment of a piece; on some of the pieces we do accept, his editing results in stunning transformations, even though one illustrious contributor, who ended up accepting all of the revisions, complained that his personality was being systematically destroyed.

Tom is the kind of academic who, in literary studies at least, seems to be fast disappearing. For all of his great distinction, he simply refuses, without any fuss about it, to regard the job he's paid to do as if it were some sort of sinecure, requiring only the occasional contact with impoverished tenants. He seems unaware of his own uniqueness, and I've never heard him comment on how hard he does work in the department or on others who do considerably less. In fact he seldom talks about

himself at all, of what he's doing or what he said to so-and-so when so-and-so said such and such to him. It was not from Tom but from Lillian Hellman that I learned of a conversation at a party, when, after her having thanked him for writing a critical review of Diana Trilling, he replied in his quiet way that he was glad that she liked it but that he hadn't written it for her. I've come to think that it's just because he allows so few opportunities for anecdote, and never exploits them when they come, that I so greatly like and revere him. After witnessing the televised beating up of war protestors at the 1968 Democratic National Convention in Chicago, Tom and I together initiated and led the effort to force the reluctant officers of the Modern Language Association to move the next MLA meeting from Chicago to Denver. Tom scarcely talked about the effort, then or since; he did the work and when it succeeded he simply left it alone.

I could sum it up by saying that to my knowledge he has never chosen to make an issue of himself. Or to put it more accurately, I can't think of an occasion when he asked that the attention of others should be redirected from an issue or a book or a problem so that the focus could be brought onto his participation, his personality, his needs, his feelings, his standards, his sense of plight. This is as great a virtue as it is a rare one, and evidence of it can be heard in the voice of his writing, whether about books or some other forms of life. When I call it rare I'm thinking especially of literary academics. Teaching the great works of literature or writing criticism of the big writers has seldom been conducive to a modesty such as his. So that while it's possible that professors of literature have become increasingly vain and obnoxious, modesty has never been a conspicuous trait among them. There's probably an occupational hazard in "professing" Shakespeare or Melville or Yeats. Reading aloud from such writers before a captive audience of the young—which Tom manages to do with a steadiness of tone that offers very few indications of his feeling—can be a heady experience for the reader. It can easily induce, over the years, the aspiration, in the most basic meaning of the word, to think of yourself as partaking in the grandeur, the eloquence, the troubled large-mindedness, the historical stature that you more than anyone understand in their works.

Though Tom has taught all of the rhetorically expansive figures I've mentioned, and writes brilliantly in *Imagination and Power* about rhetorical over-reaching, I don't wonder that he especially likes to read Jane Austen. From his writing, and in our work together on *Raritan*, it's obvious that little of the comedy in the way literature is now most often being "professed" is lost on him. Even as the hungry generations of theorists tread one another down, nearly all of them are agreed on the utter corruption and rapacity of politics, other than their own; and even as they write and talk on every conceivable subject with that amazing assurance that can come from reducing anything to one or another metaphor of "power/knowledge," they are agreed, too, and nevertheless, that individualism and the authority of the author are discredited relics of a corrupt past. Together with our other

editors, Tom and I have succeeded, I think, in making *Raritan* a place free of that sort of thing, of what Emerson calls “impudent knowingness.”

There are only a handful of critics with Tom’s scholarly and critical sensitivity to where the words on any page have been before they got there; and who, in judging the accomplishments of a writer, manage to exert so little quirkiness, partiality, or special pleading. In his sentences, his way of carrying himself into and around the language of another writer, he shows a wary, disciplined fluidity of motion that can be compared to the movements of only very skilled athletes on the field or on the court, a capacity to move off a point, once it’s been made, so as to be ready and in the most relaxed posture to meet the many different possibilities with which language can surprise you. He writes with the flexibility and uninterrupted clarity of expression that mark him as a person who knows just where he wants to go even while he is prepared, when induced by what he is reading, to go somewhere else; if his wit is unintimidating, it is also a sign that he himself is relaxed about possibilities of contradiction. Especially in reviews, he can be delightfully funny, with a kind of humor not, like Tom Wolfe’s, meant merely to score off a writer, but to express his understanding of the predicaments into which any writer can be led by too managerial, too tightly manipulative a sense of his power over language.

I hope it’s obvious that the modesty I’m attributing to him has nothing whatever to do with any reverent humility before great poems or novels. He has a deeply penetrating imagination of what it is like not to be *merely* yourself, either posed against history or entertaining the disastrous illusion that it exists only in your own mind. Literature is especially important to him because it can show how little, and not how much, any one of us can know about life, or history, or about language itself, which literature purports to control. Tom has acquainted himself with various aspects of contemporary critical theory, but I can understand why someone of his already instinctive, tender, and sympathetic skepticism would not have learned very much from it. When we both found ourselves at Harvard in the 1950s, we joined in teaching a course that has since become minor legend. It was called Hum 6, led by Reuben Brower and modeled on courses many of us had taken earlier at Amherst. Among our colleagues in the teaching of the course, over a period of several years, was Paul de Man, a person we both liked and who before his death was on the editorial board of *Raritan*. Since de Man himself was much later to write a grateful encomium to Hum 6 in the pages of his *TLS*, it doesn’t detract from his accomplishments as a critic to say that in Hum 6 meetings, lectures, discussions, and paper assignments the essentials of deconstruction were already fully at work, even though the name itself would never have occurred to any of us. In fact the term “deconstruction” has helped generate the misconception that reading carried out under its auspices is intended primarily to show how works of literature are innocent of their own inevitable frailty; it is taken, that is, as an effort to undermine the power of literature. It is instead to be understood more in

the spirit of Hum 6 and of Tom's critical practice, as a way of accounting for literature's own recognitions of the independent power of the language it must use, language which is both the instrument and the antagonist of the poet or novelist or philosopher. "The deconstruction," as de Man put it, "is not something we have added to the text, but it constituted the text in the first place."

Quite aside from the fact that Tom would never have written so clumsy a sentence, his crucial difference from someone like de Man is that he would not confine such linguistic awareness exclusively to literature. Melodramas of literary study don't interest him because he takes it for granted that in all forms of life—and not just in poems or novels or treatises—language has a life of its own, always just a little recalcitrant, a little disloyal to its pact with any writer, and ready to betray its users, to reveal them and, in the very process, to misrepresent them. Especially in *Imagination and Power* and in his writings about contemporary fiction, collected in his recent *Over Here: Criticizing America 1968-1989*, literature is imagined as gloriously, even hopelessly ambitious. He often concerns himself with the degree to which literary characters in Homer or Shakespeare or Mailer are allowed to indulge in rhetorical magnifications of themselves—and with the degree, also, to which literature extends its own claims to truth and cultural centrality—all as if prompted by a knowledge of the enormous odds against them.

His criticism everywhere quietly allows for the destructive potentialities of institutional power, including the power of literature as an institution, but always with a still more pronounced appreciation that power is something human beings happen to like. We have a taste for power and a liking for the exercises of it implicit in our fondness for hyperbole and for rhetorical excess. In its essential spirit, his criticism offers an alternative to the moralistic, near hysterical rejections of power that now find expression in academic literary and social criticism. To demonize power is to demonize ourselves and to resent literature as a corporate creation in which the human race participates. Tom's modesty, as I've been calling it, is best understood as one evidence of his historical imagination, his capacity to imagine a place in history not only for reasonableness and for compassion but for everything that makes these such necessary virtues, like human energy and desire. It can be hoped that in this coming decade criticism will, for a change, learn to follow his example.

Richard Poirier
Rutgers University