

Something Luminous

Harry Levin Memorial Service

October 20, 1994

I AM HERE to say a few words about Harry Levin, mainly in my role as one of his countless students. I first sought him out not long after I came to Harvard, from Oxford, already focused on Elizabethan literature.

I needed a dissertation advisor who would not only be open-minded and patient, but also indulgent: because while I was quite sure that I wanted to write on the poetry of Philip Sidney, I was far from having any particular topic in mind. I knew only 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, 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 worth remembering.

The chance of achieving that result was, of course, very remote. Since Harry had read virtually everything, and since his own mind had already raced far beyond the edges of whatever literary space I was just beginning to explore, there were certainly not many – if any – surprises one could ever hope to offer him.

His own advice, meanwhile, was always tentative rather than prescriptive. There were no sudden showers of lists of articles or books one was told to consult. Of course it was important to be reading widely and learning everything possible about the entire Elizabethan period and beyond. But there was always the conviction, which Harry so strongly communicated, that the poetry itself – in my case, Philip Sidney's own work – mattered first and 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 and press an analytical argument when he felt it was necessary. But more than anything, he was guided by his extraordinary sensibility, by those wonderful antennae always scanning and picking up the least flicker of any significant literary vibration in the atmosphere. Those qualities, so intuitive and finely tuned, made him the best possible supervisor for a young and uncertain student like myself.

They also insured, 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

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no one could really emulate him. How does one emulate an original and unerring sensibility? He wrote with unselfconscious elegance and style; and that, too, precluded imitation.

We are left in the end with essays and books of 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 aperçus, 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 sent to a number of friends in the form of witty but 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.¹*

1 Harry Levin, *Memories of the Moderns* (New York: New Directions, 1980), 197.