

## EDITOR'S NOTE

For more than twenty years, *Raritan* has spurned formulaic thought and sustained fresh intellectual possibilities. In an era of shifting academic fashion and stupefying political complacency, Richard Poirier has maintained this magazine's commitment to the independent life of the mind. That aim remains as necessary and as difficult as ever.

Part of the difficulty stems from the constant, subtle absorption of ideas into an unreflective intellectual consensus—the creation of “the herd of independent minds,” in the critic Harold Rosenberg's apt phrase. Even the best ideas are subject to the impish whims of the zeitgeist. Whatever their intrinsic worth, they can be reduced to slogans or stylistic gestures. There is no way to prevent this from happening, but that does not mean we have to let the simplifiers have the last word. Worthy ideas can periodically be released from imprisonment in formula.

Certainly that is true of the ideas that have animated *Raritan* from the outset. In one of his early issues, Poirier said he wanted *Raritan* to be a means of getting outside the insidious cultural process that defined controversies as two-sided battles, with the opposing forces creating “the illusion that, between them, they account for all the significant differences.” In the years since he wrote those words, legions of left-leaning humanists have turned “deconstructing the binaries” (nature/culture, male/female, normal/deviant) into an academic exercise. But the predictability of the exercise does not discredit the critique of dualism. The interrogation of either/or formulations remains a crucial task. In a world threatened by competing crusades, that skeptical impulse encourages us to question the spurious moral clarity of absolute right versus absolute wrong, to recognize that two rights (or more) can coexist in conflict that may seem insoluble but with luck may somehow be mitigated. Distrust of dualism allows people (and nations) to tolerate imperfection, to muddle through. It fosters a tragic sense of life.

Like Poirier's critique of dualism, his original job description for *Raritan* also deserves to be separated from subsequent academic associations. He wanted the magazine “to keep alive the possibilities of open subversiveness, and to do so without the vainglorious notion that

the subversive, theoretical, or avant-garde writer is an example of the heroic will.” During the last twenty years, the very idea of subversion (and its partner, “transgression”) has been virtually drained of meaning by avant-pop connoisseurs of mass culture, who have redefined resistance as an in-your-face attitude and an extended middle finger. Yet (as *Raritan’s* example shows) subversiveness can be preserved from trivialization, provided it remains genuinely open and resists the temptation of the “heroic will” to look for foils and issue manifestos. A more open subversion promotes multiple possibilities for explanation and interpretation—the play of ideas.

Intellectual playfulness is not the exclusive property of postmodern poseurs, and moral seriousness has not been patented by right-wing zealots. *Raritan* remains dedicated to resisting conventional categories, less by attack or exhortation than by the kind of work it publishes. My *Raritan*, like Poirier’s, will be free of jargon or footnotes, and based on the assumption that culture is embodied in a variety of texts: material, visual, and aural, as well as literary. I plan to reopen the door (occasionally) to fiction and widen the range of cultural forms that the magazine seeks to explore. Music, painting, photography, architecture, film, television, history, politics, and science have all been addressed in *Raritan* before, but these topics may get more space in the future. Literature in all its genres will remain a staple subject. And thanks to increased support from Rutgers University, I will also be able to include color reproductions of original art work. I intend to range widely.

The contents of this inaugural issue reflect that aim. We have a reminiscence that raises epistemological issues (Robert Darnton), several essays that challenge conventional wisdom by unearthing fresh evidence or juxtaposing dissimilar subjects (Marina Warner, Alan Trachtenberg, Michael E. Veal, Natalie Zemon Davis), two personal narratives that locate the author on the cusp of historical change (Iggy Scam, Mary Cappello) and another that re-creates a world of mechanical things few humanists have bothered to investigate (Edward Tenner). We also have some fine examples of the imaginative work that gives critics their *raison d’être* in the photography of Jennifer Lovejoy, the

fiction of Mario Rigoni Stern (translated by Gregory Conti) and Joyce Carol Oates, and the poetry of Sherod Santos and James Tate.

This and subsequent issues of *Raritan* will continue to embody certain basic editorial assumptions. Like my predecessor, I am convinced that writing and thinking are part of the same process, that style is inextricable from substance, and that a personal voice is an essential part of a point of view. At the same time, while I am determined to nourish the critical spirit amid the din of demands for national conformity, I am constantly reminded of William James's words: "real culture lives by sympathies and admirations, not by dislikes and disdains." Real cultural criticism, one could add, lives by discriminating appreciation as well as the exposure of illogic and the puncturing of pomposity. With these assumptions in mind, *Raritan* will continue to provide a site for the criticism, interpretation, and creation of cultural texts, by the best writers, thinkers, and artists I can find. Meanwhile, I want to thank the key figures in my transition to editor in chief of *Raritan*: Deans Richard Foley, Barry Qualls, and Holly Smith of Rutgers University for their consistent support; Donna Green for her efficiency and good cheer; Karen Parker Lears for her probing observations and fresh ideas; Stephanie Volmer for her grace and skill under pressure, as well as her shrewd editorial judgments; and above all Richard Poirier for his extraordinary generosity and good counsel.

*Jackson Lears*