

EDITOR'S NOTE

Paying retrospective tribute to Richard Poirier is a risky business. The founder of this journal hated pomposity, solemnity, sentimentality, the whole stock-in-trade of retirement dinners and staid eulogies. Still, he deserves an appropriate send-off. The best way to provide one, we decided, was to devote an issue to writing that embodies his intellectual style and addresses his characteristic concerns. So we begin with some materials from the *Raritan* archives: two documents that underscore the centrality of Thomas Edwards to the enterprise (the initial prospectus for the magazine and a memoir of Edwards) and several of Poirier's early Editor's Notes on topics ranging from the illusions of community created by the television evening news to the Emersonian genius of George Balanchine. The body of the magazine features work by or about figures close to him. Obviously we make no claim to comprehensiveness, but we have done our best to assemble an issue in the spirit of Richard Poirier (even if the piety of that phrase might have made him wince). Still, there are a few words to be said here about his editorial practices, and how they reflected his broader qualities of mind—curiosity, rigor, playfulness, generosity.

Poirier was genuinely curious about people and ideas, regardless of their academic pedigree or lack of it. That was what kept him alert to new talent, to the young and unknown who sometimes became major intellectual figures. As Adam Phillips remembers, "my first published essay in English was published in *Raritan*, and from then on I effectively worked for Dick, that is to say, with him in mind. He edited things so personally that often he and I would go through everything together, so that he became the person for whom I wrote. . . ." Once Poirier had decided that a writer was worth the effort, he became the most exacting—but also the most encouraging—of mentors. "He was very formidable and at the start a little scary," Mark Edmundson writes. "But in time I got the sense that Dick wanted to help me take my writing where I wanted it to go. To put it briefly, he thought that it was possible to be very clear and quite complex at the same time. He pushed me, early on, to stop writing like an assistant professor. Then, in time, he nudged me

away from a style that he thought too pop. He was a great stylist himself and he understood, I think, that developing a style was about developing a sense of yourself—who you were and what you might be and do.”

Writing, for Poirier, was always about thinking—and vice versa. “To submit to *Raritan* was to think: that was Dick Poirier’s great gift to me and to countless other people,” says James Longenbach. “He taught me how to live in the ongoing act of thinking, and to embody that act in sentences that aspired to the elegance of his own.”

Of course the teaching involved more than inspiration: Poirier’s editorial standards were nothing if not demanding. Margery Sabin recalls “how crucial Dick’s editing was to me as a writer, starting back in what I think was the first year of *Raritan* in 1981, when I sent him a badly written draft of a gigantic academic work in progress, which he and Tom Edwards, separately and with painstaking expertise and patience, edited line by line, teaching me (among other things) how to write without footnotes!” The experience, she says, “launched me on a whole new idea of writing critical prose in an entirely different way.”

The Poirier voice, in person and on the page, could be intimidating but also exhilarating. To George Levine, “it was scary to see the pages penciled over boldly, with questions sprouting everywhere. No nonsense. No bull. No complacently seeing the piece off quietly to the graveyard of print. To get into *Raritan* print, I would have to think. And think again.” Levine often got a pass from other editors, but not from Poirier. In editing as in everyday intellectual life, Poirier was no respecter of rank or reputation.

Barry Qualls remembers watching Poirier edit Richard Rorty. “Dick, you can’t do *that* [and “*that*” included marks in every available marginal space, plus cross-outs, etc.] to Richard Rorty,” Qualls said. To which Poirier replied: “I’m aiming for clarity. . . which is not necessarily the gift of the celebrated.”

For all his rigorous demands, though, Poirier never forgot that reading and writing were about aesthetic pleasure—as was editing. Without the fun of it, editing *Raritan* would have been an academic exercise like any other. “Putting together a new issue in the order and with the variety that suited him, was a piece of play, an aesthetic choice

that mattered in roughly the same way it may matter to put together a certain group for dinner, or the track of a jazz or rock album that wants to make a difference,” David Bromwich writes. By precept and example, Poirier remained dedicated to the proposition that rigor and play could coexist.

Perhaps the most elusive but also most essential quality of mind that Poirier brought to his editing was his generosity. In Akeel Bilgrami’s words, Poirier “could vastly improve one’s writing (I say ‘vastly’ and mean it) with the most extensive of revisions, and leave one’s voice wholly unaltered. The greatest editors are, in this sense, the least egotistical of men and women regarding their own intellectual power.” Editing—like thinking and writing—was for Poirier another Emersonian enterprise, the highest achievements of which recalled that moment in “Nature” when the Concord sage declared that “all mean egotism vanishes.”

I never had the good fortune of being edited by Poirier, so I cannot supply a memoir of his editorial gifts. But I did encounter the quality of his mind at firsthand, and in doing so I learned how his curiosity and generosity reinforced each other. After he had offered me the chance to edit *Raritan*, we discussed the prospect over a series of lunches. I was continually struck by his absence of vanity and his unfeigned interest in my plans. “Do you think you’ll keep it the same size?” he asked me once. This took me aback—I was somewhat awed by the prospect of editing this magazine, and surely had no intention of introducing such an immediate, obvious change. Yet the question revealed that he, to my amazement, was up for anything. That growly voice was the voice of a genuine pragmatist, committed to experiment and open to possibility: at that Emersonian moment, all mean egotism vanished. To take the magazine in new directions, I then realized, would be to continue the tradition of its founder. So I accepted the gift, and the trust, of *Raritan*. And like so many others, I owe a profound debt of gratitude to Richard Poirier.

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