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Obituary--Joel Porte

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Joel Porte

Joel Porte, 72, Ernest I. White Professor of American Studies and Humane Letters, Emeritus at Cornell University, died of esophageal cancer on 1 June 2006. He came to Cornell in 1987 after twenty-five years in the Harvard English Department, including service as its chair. Through a forty-year career at both universities he gained international recognition as a scholar of American literature and a specialist in the writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson. Just five days before his death, with Joel's knowledge and thanks in absentia, the Emerson Society awarded him its Distinguished Achievement Award for a lifetime of work.

As his coeditor and former student Saundra Morris writes, “Joel's life manifestly affirms a faith in the ‘zigzag’ yet sure path that Emerson describes in ‘Self-Reliance.’” This path took him from Russian Jewish origins in Brooklyn, through an early fascination with radios and an engineering major at Cooper Union, to a new career in English and Classics at City College. One motive for the change of direction, he recalled, was his subway reading of Mark Van Doren's A Liberal Education. He received the Ph.D. from Harvard in 1962, winning the highly competitive Bowdoin Prize for his essay on Emerson.

Joel Porte's career has both reflected and shaped the revaluing of Emerson over the decades since. His Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict (1966) framed the differences of these two like-minded writers in a way that continues to make Transcendentalism more interesting and complex through its bold argument. But later on, characteristically, Porte himself was not satisfied with the book. In the preface to Representative Man: Ralph Waldo Emerson in His Time (1988) he found his previous work “inadequately respectful” of Emerson's complexities, going on to focus whole chapters on some of these. His last book, Consciousness and Culture: Emerson and Thoreau Reviewed (2004), continued a similar process of rethinking. And meanwhile he gathered three collections of essays by others, including Emerson: Prospect and Retrospect (1982), The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson (1999), and Emerson's Prose and Poetry: Authoritative Texts, Contexts, and Criticism (2001). The mentor of many students and younger scholars, he generously included their work in these essay collections.

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Porte has made Emerson more attractive and available in a series of editions: *Emerson in His Journals* (1982), harvesting the riches of the complete *Journals and Miscellaneous Notebooks* in a selection for wide readership; the *Library of America Emerson* (1983); and *Emerson’s Prose and Poetry: A Norton Critical Edition* (2001). The last of these was coedited with Saundra Morris of Bucknell University, as was the *Cambridge Companion*. Porte and Morris have been pleased to see the Norton Edition in use by a new generation of students both in the United States and abroad.

A documentary editor will recognize much more than useful dissemination of Emerson’s writing to students, however, in their statement of textual principles for the Norton Edition. Porte and Morris adopt and acknowledge the new critical texts of Emerson’s journals, sermons, poetry notebooks, and antislavery writings, fruit of a generation’s labor by the collective “Emerson Industry.” But, given the incomplete state of modern editing of Emerson’s works, they also draw widely and knowledgeably from his first edition texts and his corrections and emendations of these. Such primary immersion in Emerson’s own words epitomizes the gift that Joel Porte has left for others.

Phyllis Cole