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J. A. Leo Lemay (1935–2008), A Remembrance

Kevin J. Hayes

My first semester in graduate school at the University of Delaware I took J. A. Leo Lemay's Edgar Allan Poe seminar. Writing a seminar paper on the subject of Poe's use of frontier imagery in his short fiction, I happened to read Prof. Lemay's essay "The Frontiersman from Lout to Hero" (*Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society* 88 [1978]: 187–223). In terms of its breadth of knowledge and depth of insight, I found this essay astonishing. As an undergraduate I had read much about the American frontier, a special interest of mine, but Prof. Lemay's essay was the single best treatment on the subject I had ever read. I started reading more of his work and realized that the frontiersman essay was typical of Prof. Lemay's approach: to pick a topic; put it within its historical, literary, and cultural contexts; and treat it exhaustively. In the coming semesters I would take several more classes from Prof. Lemay; his writings would form a sizeable part of my personal library.

Later that first semester, my officemate and fellow graduate student Tom Haslam returned to our office in the dome of Memorial Hall with a Cheshire grin on his face and a copy of Benjamin Franklin's autobiography under his arm. To be specific, Tom had a copy of the genetic text of Franklin's autobiography that Prof. Lemay had edited with Paul Zall. Tom explained that the bookstore in the student union was having a huge clearance sale. It was selling off its slow-moving inventory—mainly the books that clogged the "Faculty Authors" section. In fact, the store was selling these clearance books like raw hamburger: ninety-nine cents a pound. I asked Tom if there were any more copies of the Franklin edition left. As soon as he said yes, I dropped what I was doing, bolted downstairs, and headed across campus to the student union, where I snagged the very last copy of the Lemay / Zall genetic text.

Though I added this edition to my personal library, I did not read it as readily as I had read the frontiersman essay. The Lemay / Zall genetic text is chockful of information about Franklin's composition of the autobiography, but it is quite intimidating, with its up arrows and down arrows, angle brackets, braces, and square brackets. When I eventually worked my way through the text, I was impressed with its editors' ingenuity and hard work. The genetic text of Franklin's autobiography is a model of textual editing, a useful reference tool that can open up new ways of seeing Franklin and his world. When I wrote a seminar paper on Franklin's use of religion in the autobiography for Prof. Lemay a few years later, I made use of the genetic text, arguing that many of Franklin's religious thoughts

were really afterthoughts inserted in revision to add a veneer of Christianity to an otherwise secular work. Prof. Lemay liked the paper well enough to invite me to contribute to a collection of new essays on Franklin's autobiography.

That collection fell through when the publisher abruptly canceled the series, but Prof. Lemay or Leo, as he let me call him once I completed my dissertation, continued to keep an eye on my career. Attending the MLA conference a few years after graduate school, I spent one afternoon strolling through the book exhibit with a friend of mine, who had attended graduate school in one of those prestigious universities located in that narrow "V" formed by the Atlantic coast and the Hudson River. As we turned from one aisle to the next, we suddenly ran into Leo. I introduced him to my friend. After we chatted briefly, he walked us over to one particular booth and introduced me to a friend of his, who was a commissioning editor for a major university press. Not only did Leo introduce me to him, he also sang my praises and encouraged this editor to consider my work for publication.

Before the always-energetic Leo ricocheted off in another direction, he and I agreed to meet for drinks that evening. For the nonce, my friend and I continued to view the publishers' exhibits. When Leo was out of earshot, she said, "Wow! My teacher has never done anything like that for me." This personal introduction was just one of many things Leo did for me over the course of my career. My experience is not unique. Similarly, he kept an eye on the careers of many of his former students. Correct that last phrase. There is no such thing as being a "former Leo Lemay student": once a Leo student, always a Leo student.

Leo was the one who encouraged me to join the Association for Documentary Editing. Having established himself as a challenging new voice in the world of documentary editing with the genetic text of Franklin's autobiography, Leo became active in the ADE, one of many professional societies of which he was an active member. At the annual meetings sponsored by these societies, Leo always enjoyed cocktail parties, hotel-room get-togethers, and various other assorted social receptions. No doubt many ADE members have fond memories of late nights at the ADE conference that ended up in Leo's hotel room hunched around a bottle of Wild Turkey.

Leo's efforts to encourage social interaction among professional colleagues had a greater purpose beyond conviviality. He saw the social gathering as a way of furthering scholarship. He brought together like-minded scholars as a way to get them talking, thinking, and writing. Many people came away from his parties with new contacts in the literary world and new research ideas to mull over for weeks and years. Leo's writings and his personal interactions combined to make him a major force in the field of American literary scholarship. Speaking for myself, I can say that he had a profound impact on my thinking and left an indelible mark on my memory. I miss him.