



Edgar Rosenberg

September 21, 1925 – December 19, 2015

After a short illness, Professor Emeritus Edgar Rosenberg passed away in Ithaca N.Y. on December 19, 2015. The previous September he celebrated his ninetieth birthday in high spirits, traveling with his beloved wife Barbara to reconnect with long-time friends in Europe and North America.

Edgar was born in Fürth, Germany, on September 21, 1925. Fleeing from Nazi persecution in 1939, he and his family found refuge first in Switzerland, then in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, and finally a year later in New York City. After high school, he joined the U.S. Army and served in Europe, for which he received a Combat Infantry Medal in 1944. With characteristic bemusement and irony at his own expense, Edgar referred to the medal, earned for his accomplishments as a translator and interrogator of German prisoners-of-war, as given “for making small talk in my native language.” He attended Cornell on the GI Bill, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa, and received his B.A. in 1949 and M.A. in 1950. In addition to his doctorate conferred by Stanford University in 1958, he received awards for his fiction writing from Cornell, Stanford, the Bread Loaf School, and Doubleday Publishers.

In 1957 Edgar joined the English Department at Harvard University as Instructor and was quickly promoted to Assistant Professor. In 1965 he returned to Cornell as Associate Professor of English. From 1970 until his retirement thirty-two years later, he held a joint appointment as Professor of English and Comparative Literature. Edgar was the author of *From Shylock to Svengali: Jewish Stereotypes in English Fiction* (1960) and some fifty pieces

of short fiction, translations, and articles in journals ranging from *Esquire* and *Commentary* to *The Dickensian* and *The Shaw Review*. His sumptuously annotated edition of Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1999) is a classic. For his scholarship and research he received a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1973-74, a Fulbright Fellowship to lecture at the University of Haifa in 1988-89, and in 2012, in recognition of his cultural services in bridging the study and teaching of English, German, and American literature, an honorary doctorate from the University of Saarland at Saarbrücken.

Edgar's outstanding work with students earned him a Cornell University Clark Teaching Award in 1993. Over the years he designed and conducted legendary courses on Introduction to Fiction, Introduction to Comparative Literature, The English Novel, The European Novel, and for the Creative Writing Program annual spring-semester workshop seminars in narrative fiction. Among junior faculty members Edgar proved a welcoming and encouraging colleague from the day they arrived until long after he retired. Among university-wide faculty at all ranks he engaged in a spirited correspondence and discussion about literary matters, whether through carefully thought-out written notes, telephone conversations, or face-to-face contact. There was no text to which he couldn't add a surprising insight or erudite remark.

Those who knew him will never forget his office in Goldwin Smith Hall, often packed with students in an impromptu seminar or tutorial, frequently graced by a colleague or out-of-town visitor, sometimes governed by Edgar alone, beckoning at the door for others to "Come in for a moment, I want to show you something." That something would likely be a note with a striking turn of phrase by a dear friend from the past, treasured up in his prodigious memory. To go back in time, we'd remember at the center of his desk a manual typewriter whose carriage he would load with sheet after sheet of paper to type a sentence or two, tear it out, toss it away, and announce that he'd found a better expression to convey his thought. In later years his typewriter yielded to a non-stop computer flanked by stack upon stack of print-outs. On a shelf of his bookcase stood a row of vintage cameras. Edgar was a fine photographer, and when you'd least expect it an eight by eleven photograph that he'd taken of you a week earlier would appear in your mail.

But even those photographs ceded pride of place to his love of words. Edgar was a superb scholar, a gifted and accomplished

storyteller, and he was one of the founding spirits of the English Department's Creative Writing Program. He contributed to it in any number of ways, including financially. With serious undergraduate writers he was uncommonly generous with his time. The coffee table in his living room was piled not with books about the Metropolitan Opera or the Metropolitan Museum but with stacks of his students' (and some colleagues') works.

With his native German, near-native French, more than a little Spanish and Italian, even some Russian, ancient Latin and Hebrew, and what he called his Remedial English, Edgar was the soul of Comparative Literature. Sometimes he'd quip that academic study (in his words) had "fallen on Lenten days and silent nights," that fashionable critics (in his words) "toggle with footnotes" and "play peek-a-boo with each other," and that their bibliographies leave us with "the expense of spirit in a waste of names." And yet Edgar's brilliant edition of *Great Expectations* grapples mightily with these conventions. Its footnotes and bibliography account for everything associated with that novel except for (again in his words) "impertinent stuff, like *Great Expectations: A Guide to Pregnancy* and *Great Expectations: Preparing for Evangelism through Bible Study*."

Not to betray too badly, we hope, a confidence, but Edgar's wife Barbara told some of us (and there were witnesses) that Edgar could have wooed and won her with one of his footnotes alone, that was how much in love she was with the language of the man. He could have wooed and won his colleagues—in fact, he did—with his wonderfully baroque summations at the end of each department faculty meeting, first for the language alone, and second for the fact that those often opulent words signaled the end of the meeting. We were then free to walk out with Edgar's language in our ears, occasionally wanting to hug the man and sometimes put a loving muzzle on him. We still do. What a genial colleague and what a dear loyal friend he was.

William J. Kennedy, chair; W. Lamar Herrin and Daniel R. Schwarz