

April 27, 2004

**IN MEMORIAM  
EDWIN SILL FUSSELL  
PROFESSOR EMERITUS OF LITERATURE  
1922-2002**

Edwin Fussell, professor emeritus of Literature, died in La Jolla on August 27, 2002. He was the most effortlessly articulate person ever to teach in UC San Diego's Literature Department, someone who never uttered a bureaucratic word in his life. Everything he said or wrote had an element of the unexpected, or of paradox: patrician and fierce Thoreauvian democrat, committed doctrinal Catholic convert but also a maverick with a wicked sense of scorn, an ascetic bon vivant. He made his distinguished career as a scholar of American fiction and poetry of the period 1800 to the present, but he was also an excellent poet, equally virtuoso in meter and free verse.

After earning a B.A. degree (1943) from Pomona College, Fussell served in World War II aboard a Navy destroyer in the Pacific. He earned his doctorate from Harvard in 1949, as a student of the politically and personally daring F. O. Matthiessen. In his first teaching post he found himself at UC Berkeley at the time of the Loyalty Oath controversy, and to his eternal credit he refused to sign and lost his job. He taught American Literature at Pomona, then at the Claremont Graduate School, and came to UC San Diego three years after publishing his astonishing second book, *Frontier: American Literature and the American West* (1965).

In *Frontier*, he showed that the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century American writers who lived in the East were influenced, sometimes like Cooper and Thoreau dominated, by the presence of an open Western margin—frontier, wilderness, native Americans, all of which may stand as images of unsponsored freedom and spatial and moral uncertainty. The book was astonishing in part because of its psychoanalytic turn—the point was that *Frontier* and all its metaphors were introjected and variously disguised; also because of Fussell's characteristic style, very close to factual-textual information, but with at least one zinger per page that was just on the edge of outrageousness.

Edwin Fussell's other scholarly books are a study of American poet Edwin Arlington Robinson (1954), a translation from the Italian of Cesare Pavese's essays on American literature (1970), his book on American meter, metaphor and diction, *Lucifer in Harness* (1973) with its apotheosis of Walt Whitman and its polite denunciation of Emily Dickinson, and separate books on the French Side (Columbia U.P., 1990) and the Catholic Side (Cambridge U.P., 1993) of Henry James. He also published two books of poems, *The Purgatory Poems* (1967) and *Your Name Is You* (1975).

The books on James were the result of several years of work in the 1980s with Literature graduate students, in a study circle led by him. After his retirement in 1991, he spent a number of years living in Paris and Rome. He enjoyed writing draft versions of his James books in the foyers and lounges of the hotels where he resided. He felt close to the expatriate intentions of James, and admired in James a Protestant who would see the merits of Catholicism in its European setting while still keeping his distance. (Fussell's own Catholicism was that of a convert, the product of reading Dante closely and studying dogma; the idea of vague spirituality was to him a disgrace when sinning, wars, betrayals, and bad establishments [except Catholic] were our condition). He continued writing long and short works on French figures like Chateaubriand and Balzac, and in a letter from the 1990s he wrote to one of the undersigned: "Paris is divine. Balzac goes well, although I think I have one chapter needing revision. Give my expatriate blessings to the S.D. Chargers, but not to the Padres, who can fall no lower. À bientôt, even if I have no plan to return."

Students and colleagues remember Edwin Fussell's friendly attention to writing drafts: some of our best sentences are gifts from him, because he rewrote passages in the margins, tightening phrases but also evoking what we really should have meant. This is the most rare kind of help. Nancy Hatch, who wrote her thesis with him, remarks on his manner: "Talking with Ed or reading anything he wrote usually required a special attentiveness so as not to miss any of the several layers of meaning being conveyed.... The orderly, reflective habits of [his] well-appointed mind implied that he would not be one to suffer fools gladly, but in his dealing with students I remember no abrasiveness or bullying on his part ever. When someone's thinking seemed to him unjustified or inadequate, he would try to improve matters by posing questions intended not to pierce but to nudge, rather like a patient sad-eyed basset."

There were no casual dialogues with Ed Fussell. Whether having dinner at his home in Solana Beach, or a newly discovered trattoria in Roma, or in his favorite bistro in Paris, the exchange immediately drifted to fundamentals before even sitting down for the first taste of his recommended wines. The differences between Aristotle and Aquinas on material and efficient cause? Who was the greatest American writer? It should be Mark Twain or Poe, but Twain's overwhelming sense of humor is a strike against him, whilst Poe is too dark to be recognized as such. It could be Henry James, were it not for his pull toward Catholicism. Then why not Walt Whitman or William Carlos Williams? Because the American pantheon would not bestow such distinction upon poets, whereas the English world would not hesitate to name Donne. We always ended up acknowledging that the notion of the "Great American Writer" was perhaps still a work in progress. Therein lay its elusiveness and its power. We closed many Roman or Parisian restaurants without ever ending our debate. In exile everywhere, Fussell lived the legendary "movable feast" where American expats would apprehend a deeper sense of identity than at home.

Let this end on poets and a poem. In the last paragraph of *Lucifer in Harness*, Fussell speaks of America and America's poets. He ends the whole book on quotations that convey his own fullest idea of writing as culture: "There is always in America a trauma, a rending of medium and culture. We all of us—poets, readers, and nonreaders—live it every day, and it is a damned difficult game. Reversing Poe, William Carlos Williams reminds us in *Paterson* that 'it is dangerous to leave written that which is badly written. A chance word, upon paper, may destroy the world'; and then, consonant with the constituting metaphor of Whitman's whole work: 'Only one answer: write carelessly so that nothing that is not green will survive.'" This is followed by Fussell's name and the significant date, for Independence Day, "4 July 1973." One of Edwin Fussell's own poems from the late 1960s and the time of his conversion is "Before Morning"—this is a dark-night-of-the-soul poem about an insomniac dialogue with Dante, where Dante tells the speaker "I came to Love/by triple rhyme....When you return/say what I say." The poem ends—essential Fussell:

I came to life  
and a new day  
my freshened sense  
filling the place  
with the sweet stuff  
of time and space  
while from outside  
the morning breeze  
I could not write  
was good enough.

Alain J.-J. Cohen  
Donald Wesling, Chair