

# Joel Porte

*November 13, 1933 — June 1, 2006*

Joel Porte, Ernest I. White Professor of American Studies and Humane Letters Emeritus, died of esophageal cancer at the age of 72. An internationally renowned scholar of American literature and an Emerson specialist, Joel came to Cornell in 1987. He spent his earlier career at Harvard, where he resigned as Ernest Bernbaum Professor of Literature and Chair of the Department of English to join Cornell as the Frederick J. Whiton Professor of American Literature. From 1989-98, Joel served as Director of American Studies at Cornell. Retired from the faculty in 2004, he received the national Emerson Society's Distinguished Achievement Award in 2006.

Joel Porte earned his Ph.D. degree from Harvard in 1962, when he won the coveted Bowdoin Prize for an essay on Emerson—an award which George Santayana, a favorite author of his, had failed to capture in 1886. At 36, he became one of the youngest full professors in the Department of English. He was a Rockefeller Scholar in Residence in Bellagio, Italy (1979), and a John Simon Guggenheim Fellow (1981-82). He served as a visiting scholar and lecturer around the world; as scholarly consultant for publishing companies, universities, professional associations, and media groups; and on the editorial boards of key academic journals.

Joel's life journey approached that "zigzag line of a hundred tacks" celebrated in Emerson's "Self-Reliance." Beginning in Brooklyn, where he was born to second-generation Russian Jewish immigrants, it led him through an early fascination with amateur radio, which brought him a license to operate station W2YIR; to Brooklyn Technical High School, where he excelled in mechanical drawing and printing technology; and to Cooper Union, where he discovered his lack of interest in an engineering career. While reading on his subway commute, he was moved by a paragraph in Mark Van Doren's, *A Liberal Education*, to devote himself instead to literary study, and he enrolled in night school at Brooklyn College and then in the City College of New York, after presenting himself uninvited to the Registrar.

At C.C.N.Y., from which he graduated *magna cum laude* in English and Classics, he won two Claflin medals for excellence in Greek, the Ward Prize in English Composition, and election to Phi Beta Kappa. Throughout college, he studied the cello with famed teacher Otto Deri, and worked as a runner and office boy at the Atlas Corporation to help support his mother and younger brother. There, he received crucial support from the woman he considered his intellectual "mother," Emilie Dixon. Although he was to travel to Harvard and to Cornell, his outsider status as a young man informed a lifelong generosity to others.

Joel published twelve books as well as introductions, articles, and reviews. His most notable volumes include his literary biography of Emerson, *Representative Man* (Oxford 1979; rev. ed., Columbia 1988); *In Respect to Egotism: Studies in American Romantic Writing* (Cambridge 1991); and *Consciousness and Culture: Emerson and Thoreau Reviewed* (Yale 2004). His edited and co-edited volumes are international standards in the field; they include *Emerson in His Journals* (Belknap/Harvard 1982); the Library of America Emerson (1983); the Cambridge *New Essays on Henry James's Portrait of a Lady* (1990); *The Cambridge Companion to Ralph Waldo Emerson* (1999); and *Emerson's Prose and Poetry: A Norton Critical Edition* (2001). He co-edited the latter two volumes with Professor Sandra Morris of Bucknell University, his former doctoral student at Cornell.

The circuit of Joel's scholarship was large, often expanding and as often returning upon itself. Coming to believe that his early *Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict* (Wesleyan 1966) was at once "too polemical and inadequately respectful of Emerson's complexities," he returned in *Representative Man* to write a compendious imaginative biography of the man and, in shorter studies, to insist on the writer's achievement as a literary artist, "in his tropes and *topoi*, his metaphors and verbal wit, in the remarkable consistency of his conceiving mind and executing hand." Having studied the fiction of Cooper, Poe, Hawthorne, Melville and James in *The Romance in America* (Wesleyan 1969), he returned, with *In Respect to Egotism*, to the greater cultural significance of American subjectivity in these figures and in Frederick Douglass, Harriet Beecher Stowe, Walt Whitman and Emily Dickinson. His essays and lectures ranged from the Puritans to Santayana's philosophy, from the poetry of Wallace Stevens to Jewish-American literature, from "Emerson's French Connection: Montaigne, Fénelon, Madame de Staël, and Others" to the history of cereal boxes and the Quaker Oats Man as cultural symbol. On all these subjects he wrote with passion, urbanity, impish humor and wide allusiveness. Only in Joel's writing could Dr. Strangelove and Molly Bloom rub shoulders so comfortably with Thoreau and Isaac Watts; only Joel could find such pleasure and significance in Thoreau's meditations on a mushroom called the *phallus impudicus*—or express such delight at discovering another one in Mann's *Magic Mountain*. The circling went on. In a late essay on Henry Roth's *Call it Sleep*, he remarked that his

*"return, as a student of American writing, to the talmud torah of my childhood in the works of Jewish authors required a kind of circling back from the standard canon of American literature to which I devoted myself in graduate school."*

Or perhaps not so. His Harvard, his *cheder*, was the same that had nourished

*"my quasi-Hebraic masters, Emerson and Thoreau, and that, over the years, would open its doors, willy-nilly, to many Jewish scholars and writers, enabling them (in Emerson's words) 'to translate the world into some particular world of [their] own.'"*

In his teaching as in his scholarship, Joel stretched the boundaries of American literature and American Studies. He played a central role in the renaissance of the latter program at Cornell. Appointed director, he swayed the dean to provide resources to enhance the visibility and reach of the program, and within a couple of years American Studies had its own offices and administrative assistant. Along with American Literature and American History, American Government became a “core” discipline within the major—but Joel reached out to faculty in Anthropology, Music, Women’s Studies, ethnic studies, and Industrial and Labor Relations as well, and by the early 1990s, American Studies had become one of the fastest growing undergraduate majors in the College of Arts and Sciences. As a senior hire in English, he anchored the department’s advanced and graduate offerings in early American literature and the American renaissance and offered a popular course in Jewish-American writing. He served on the special committees of numerous graduate students who sought him out, both those whose interests intersected closely with his and those who realized the importance of working with someone who would treat their work with capacious generosity and a skeptical eye. For these students and others, Joel was an intimidatingly learned but benevolent and loyal figure who inspired them with his passions for literature, language, and imagination. He read them poetry in English, Greek, Latin, Italian, French, and German, and amused them with his usually decorous and always graceful jokes. His coworkers remember him as a wonderful friend and deeply dedicated colleague.

They remember, too, his other passions—for life with Helene Sophrin Porte, his wife of twenty years and a senior lecturer in Psychology at Cornell; for cooking and entertaining with her at Whiffletree Farm on Hanshaw Road and then at their home on Mitchell Street; for his daughter, Susanna Maria, child of an earlier marriage to Ilana d’Ancona, which ended in 1977; for the intricate logistics of air travel, which took him and Helene abroad frequently, and to Rome in his last year; and for the life of the mind in Ithaca and Vermont, Cambridge and New York City. They will miss his intellect and humanity, but perhaps most of all, his laughter.

*Glenn Altschuler, Edgar Rosenberg, Stuart Davis*