

David Novarr

June 29, 1917 — January 21, 1987

It is difficult to overestimate the contributions of David Novarr to the postwar history of the Department of English. Beyond David's superb scholarship and genial influence as a wise and penetrating teacher, beyond his stalwart services to the department, the university, and the scholarly community at large, his students and colleagues were beneficiaries of even rarer qualities: uncommon common sense, generosity of spirit, unfailing friendliness, and constant collegial support of young and old alike.

David Novarr was born in Hartford, Connecticut, the older son of a respected (and still-active) merchant. Family relationships were always of prime importance to David. In his last book, *The Lines of Life* (the titular phrase occurs in both Shakespeare and Ben Jonson), David alludes movingly to what he has learned about those "lines" in his own family, from his grandparents to his grandchildren, "all of whom have made me more aware of my involvement in generations than even Erik Erikson's work has." David's father would take him along on business trips to New York and, like as not, the two of them would visit Yankee Stadium before returning to Hartford; as a Yale undergraduate, David wrote a few lines to his mother every day.

David was from the first an outstanding scholar. At the Thomas Snell Weaver High School in Hartford he was the valedictorian and winner of the Sterling Memorial Connecticut High School Scholarship to Yale. At the college he continued to win many prizes and scholarships and was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in 1938. In the fall of 1939 he enrolled in Yale's doctoral program in English. In February 1942 he was married to Ruth Victoria Gordon of Hartford. Shortly thereafter he enlisted in the U.S. Navy and served for forty-three months with the Communications Security Section of the Chief of Naval Operations in Washington, D.C. His final rating was chief specialist in cryptography. While still in the Navy, David taught English at George Washington University (October 1943 to March 1944). In the fall of 1946 David, Gordy, and Johnny Novarr came to Ithaca, where David took up his duties as instructor of English at Cornell. David was promoted to faculty instructor in 1949, the year he received his doctorate from Yale; to assistant professor in 1951; to associate professor in 1956; and to professor in 1963.

In 1951-52 David received a Ford Foundation Fellowship to complete his research for a book on Izaak Walton's *Lives* of Sir Henry Wotton (a diplomat and minor poet) and of four notable Anglican churchmen: John Donne, Richard Hooker, George Herbert, and Robert Sanderson. Two of the churchmen, Donne and Herbert, were of

course superb artists in verse and prose, as well as divines. Later perceptions of all five men had been profoundly influenced by Walton's supposedly straightforward and "artless" biographies. By 1958, the year David's massive study, *The Making of Walton's Lives*, appeared under the Cornell imprint, it was abundantly clear that a strong voice had been added to seventeenth-century studies. David's scholarly contributions were meticulously researched and beautifully executed. Even before publication of the Walton book a senior seventeenth-century scholar praised David's work for throwing "more light on Walton's craftsmanship than anyone hitherto has done." Later, a senior Walton specialist wrote in *Modern Philology*: "This study is one of the most important in Waltonian scholarship ever to have appeared, and one that will have a far-reaching effect upon seventeenth-century scholarship generally." David demonstrated that Walton (1593-1683) was far from straightforward and objective; rather, through successive revisions the biographer presented his subjects as exponents of his own sense of ideal conduct and of the Anglican faith. *Walton's Life of Donne* "increasingly veered toward hagiography in its revisions," and he had other ideal "patterns in mind when he wrote the other lives." With the appearance of David's book, studies of Walton, Donne, and Herbert could never be quite the same again.

Donne was the poet whom David most loved to analyze. In 1956 his article on Donne's "Epithalamium Made at Lincoln's Inn" had startled and impressed scholars by its brilliant argument that the poem had been written not for a genuine but for a mock wedding staged by the law students and that the "bride" addressed in the poem was in reality a male in bridal dress. David's path-breaking studies were collected in *The Disinterred Muse: Donne's Texts and Contexts* (Cornell University Press, 1980). Of this important volume a leading seventeenth-century scholar has written: "[This book] dramatizes remarkably the processes of true scholarship put to the services of literary understanding, response, and judgment. Novarr... sifts the evidence concerning the occasions, genres, and purposes of the poems Donne wrote after taking holy orders, and ... comes up with fresh insights, significantly new datings or radically new interpretations. He has illuminating things to say about the Holy Sonnets and the great hymns and the most remarkable insights into the translations and the devotions that I have seen. All scholarly readers, like all future editors, will have to take into account Novarr's work."

David's most recent book, *The Lines of Life: Theories of Biography, 1880-1970* (1986) is also certain to be gratefully received by both scholars and lay readers. It is a characteristically acute and expert examination of biographical theorists from the heyday of Victorian positivism to the threshold of deconstruction and the contemporary denial of coherent personality. David was also editor of the fine Borzoi anthology *Seventeenth-Century English Prose* (Knopf, 1967).

It is of course not merely incidental that in the 1950's David taught "the first course in biography offered by the [English] Department, a survey from Plutarch to Strachey." From 1980 to 1985 he taught a popular course in traditional and experimental twentieth-century biography from Freud and Lytton Strachey to Virginia Woolf and Nancy Milford.

David's administrative services to Cornell were varied and notable. Among other offices he was director of freshman English (1956-59) at a time when every freshman in the university took one or another version of the course, chairman of the Committee on the Preparation of Secondary-School Teachers of English, president of Phi Beta Kappa, assistant chairman of the Department of English (1966-68), and acting chairman (1968-69). The years between 1965 and 1970 were momentous, and the department had a momentous agenda: among other things, to institute the new Freshman Humanities Program, to reduce the heavy teaching load, to set female instructors on the road to tenure, to hire Black faculty members at both the professorial and junior levels, to attract the best possible assistant professors at a time when the baby-boom generation was inundating admissions offices and when new Ph.D.'s could take full advantage of a roaring sellers' market. Without David's heroic services these departmental goals, among many others, could not have been so satisfactorily achieved. And in 1968-69, the most turbulent year in Cornell history, David preserved the integrity of the department at a time when centrifugal forces were exceedingly strong. Again, just two weeks before David relinquished the chair, he sent a letter to Professor J. Saunders Redding, asking whether he would be interested in an appointment at Cornell. The happy outcome of that inquiry is known to us all: when Professor Redding accepted the Ernest I. White Chair of American Studies and Humane Letters, Cornell added to its roster an outstanding literary and scholarly figure.

Although David remained actively engaged in the life of the department and the university, he was now able to devote himself more fully to scholarship, to teaching, and to his family. A fellowship at the Huntington Library (1978) helped him to finish his book on Donne. He developed new courses. He served on the Advisory Screening Committee of the Senior Fulbright Program. The Novarrs loved to entertain in their charming home. Journeys to other countries afforded instruction and delight. Gordy and David enjoyed theatergoing both at home and abroad. One day after returning with Gordy from a theatrical tour of London, only to be greeted by a stateside blizzard, David died suddenly of an aneurysm. Characteristically, during the few hours that had been left to him in Ithaca, David wrote a covering note to a scholarly journal, enclosing an article on John Donne that he had completed just before Gordy and he departed from Ithaca.

A great many people were the beneficiaries of David's warm, instinctive concern for others. He was realistic and tough-minded and could be blunt about pretentious or discourteous persons. But he looked for the best in people and greeted it generously. He had indeed a genius for friendship: when he was a nontenured instructor he and his family made a twenty-mile trip to greet a new non-Ph.D. instructor in an outlying village; another instructor, who shared a small office with David for one year, admired him from the start and grew more and more fond of him as the year went by. Installed after a time in an office of his own, David would greet visitors, in his warm baritone, with the hearty invitation, "Come sit!"

It is not difficult to discover the reasons for David's affection for so many persons and for so many persons' affection for him. David believed, with John Donne, that no one "is an island entire of itself," that everyone "is a piece of the continent, a part of the main[land]," and that those engaged in a common enterprise would of course do all they could to encourage one another. That is the secret of David's hold on us, and of our hold on him, "while memory holds a seat / In this distracted globe."

In addition to Gordy, David is survived by a son, John Gordon Novarr; by a daughter, Frances (Mrs. David Sheldon Strayer), and by four grandchildren.

Anthony Caputi, Charles Levy, Walter Slatoff, Ephim Fogel