

Eric A. Blackall. 10/19/1914 - 11/16/1989

....first met while still a graduate student at Yale where Eric, already at Cornell, had come to deliver a lecture on Hamann. There he was, a slight man, with a face that might have been carved by a Renaissance artist such as Brueggemann, Stoss or Riemenschneider, speaking with great eloquence and fielding questions with assurance and courtesy: the most impressive performance of the year.

It was during his final year as departmental chairman, in 1965, that he brought me to Cornell, from Duke University, which marks the true beginning of our long association. He had become chairman in 1957, at an annual salary, incidentally, proudly announced by the Secretary of the Board of Trustees, of \$12,000. In 1963 he was appointed to another 5-year term, this time without mention of salary. But by 1965, eight years into his chairmanship, he had had enough, handed the entire thing over to Tijs Jolles whom he had hired away from the University of Chicago, took a whole year off and enjoyed a Guggenheim Fellowship. But not as much as he had thought he would. After many years of ceaseless activity, both here and in England, pedagogical, scholarly and administrative, the sudden slowdown came as a jolt; he didn't know what to do with himself, he confided at one point. Why this might be so soon became clear to me: the cause of his discomfort was an acute sense of obligation and service momentarily uncommitted. I watched him respond, time and again, readily and without fuss, until his retirement and beyond, to multiple claims made upon his time and talents, including the directorship of the Society for the Humanities from 1980-83.

Much deserved honors came a bit late, but then in swift succession: the Avalon Foundation Chair in the Humanities in 1965; the Jacob Gould Schurmann Chair in 1967; membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences in 1970; membership in the American Philosophical Society in 1971.

In 1973 Austria awarded him the Cross of Honor, mainly for a deed of daring committed in 1938 when, as a graduate student in Vienna, he saved the papers of the Jewish physician and writer Arthur Schnitzler from certain destruction by the Nazis. The honor came 35 years late but, typically and charmingly Austrian, when we gathered for the ceremony in NYC, the citation was ready, but the medal itself hadn't yet arrived from Vienna. Typically also, neither the Austrian Consul nor Eric were perturbed by it in the slightest.

Eric retired in 1985. During a symposium in his honor at the Society for the Humanities he was awarded the Order of Merit of the German Federal Republic.

Those are some of the mile posts from 1965-85. There were, of course, many more along the path of this very special pilgrim. A few words about what I believe made him special. He was "musisch" in the best sense of the German word, i.e. endowed with a keen appreciation, both intellectual and sensual, of the fine arts, literature and music in particular. And he loved to each the things he loved. He liked the tangible in literature and found it very fitting that, after his final Faust seminar, the students should present him with a stuffed black poodle. Nabokov, when he taught here, wanted students who loved stories, good, wellcrafted stories. Similarly, Eric loved students who believed in poodles.

But what was really the measure of the man, in my eyes, much, much more than his teaching and his impressive scholarship, was his bearing. Eric had polio as a child which left him partially crippled. In other words, he lived with an irreversible infirmity. On his best days you noticed hardly a trace of it; he carried himself magnificently. But his achievements are the result of a persistent and heroic struggle. "Heroic" here not a manifestation of excessive and naturally abundant vitality and strength but a daily display of courage and perseverance in overcoming weakness, a triumph of the spirit in spite of a fragile physical base.

Stiff upper lip? Yes, that too. But more than that, I believe, it was a conscious adoption of a stoic-military-aristocratic tradition, a life style that detests surrender to what it deems inferior.

Early conditioning in self-discipline helped him overcome occasional career setbacks as well. Example; my favorite one. A publishing house had rejected a manuscript it had solicited. One possible explanation: while Eric was completing it there was a change in personnel and editorial policy. Eric was dejected at first; then angry; then he breathed contempt which, with him, took the form of a swift and audible discharge of air through the nose (nff). He rewrote the book, this time in English and for a general audience and for the Cornell University Press: Goethe's Novels. Followed by another volume, on the romantic novel, dedicated to his son Roger; followed by a volume of Goethe in translation: Wilhelm Meister's apprenticeship. That was Eric: resilient, stubborn, courageous,

triumphant.

By now I feel obliged to state that none of this is meant to imply or suggest that the man was saintly, which he was most decidedly not. Nor did he want to be, I think. He could be most deferential to any office holder, downright humble, until he remembered who he was. Accused of being a prima donna, really, he replied that he hadn't come to Cornell to join the chorus (nff).

His wit ranged from the funny to the devastating. Like Mephisto, the black poodle, he was a master of the put-down. He could instill fear, and he knew how to intimidate. Those were formidable weapons at his disposal; but he chose to use them rarely, and finally not at all. Like the aging Louis XIV he seemed to banish everything vulgar and offensive from his environment. In a manner of speaking, he would use the word only if he stepped in it.

So, in the end, he was the man for whom the proper epitaph was written long ago:

His life was gentle and the elements
So mixed in him that Nature might stand up
And say to all the world: this is a man.
According to his virtue - let us remember him.

Ave, cara anima.

1/27/1990. Words spoken at the Memorial Service, Anabel Taylor Hall, Cornell University.