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ALAN WALD

## "Il Miglior Fabbro"

In the final entry of their droll yet eminently sensible *Academic Keywords: A Devil's Dictionary for Higher Education* (1999), co-authors Cary Nelson and Stephen Watt cast a cold eye on academic "Yuppies." The reference is to a new generation of careerist professors who "do a cost-benefit analysis before they say hello in the hallways." With an exaggerated sense of entitlement, this fresh crop of elitist academics seems to look upon every institutional service performed as "an immense concession, despite the fact that many departments now mentor young faculty devotedly and guard their time and interests with some care." Thus is created a culture in which "shameless requests for privileges and benefits never granted anyone have become routine."

To remedy to this drift, one that transcends traditional ideological commitments to Left and Right, Nelson and Watts insist that "It is an entirely possible to be a productive scholar, a successful teacher, and still define some areas of major community involvement." As an example, they point to "graduate student union activists" who "juggle all those arenas and manage to adjust the balance often enough to satisfy all three." For established scholars, however, the premier illustration would be Cary Nelson himself.

With the appearance of *Manifesto of a Tenured Radical* in 1997, Cary became the national exemplar of the committed scholar who conceived of the advance of his own career in the context of the amelioration of the rank-and-file of the academic community; more specifically, graduate students, part-time employees, and campus workers. Indeed, Cary has succeeded so brilliantly as the scourge of bankrupt university administrators and head-in-the-sand officials of the Modern Languages Association (to whom he recommends his roguishly-titled "Twelve-Step Program for Academia"), that one might fail to apprehend the full import of his coupled contribution as the foremost researcher and theorist of modern social poetry of his generation.

As an exact contemporary of Cary, I have observed the arc of his career with considerable wonder. Cary was born on May 15, 1946, in Philadelphia, fifteen days before myself. We were both raised in liberal Jewish families and we both attended Antioch College in Ohio during the mid-1960s. Antioch was in those years an experimental work-study school with a bohemian culture especially known as a haven for civil rights activists and "Red Diaper Babies." Although we were assigned to separate divisions (I was working at jobs around the United States while he was studying in Yellow Springs, and vice versa), we studied with the same literature professors and were both active in the campus chapter of SDS (Students for a Democratic Society).

However, Cary somehow managed to graduate in 1967, a full two years ahead of myself. Before I knew it, he had his Ph.D. in hand from the University of Rochester--when I had finished only one year of graduate study at Berkeley! By 1973 Cary published his first book, *The Incarnate Word: Literature as Verbal Space*, and he was already tenured at the University of Illinois in 1975 when I commenced my first year as

an assistant professor at the University of Michigan! One year after his second book, *Our First Last Poets: Vision and History in Contemporary American Poetry* (1981), Cary became a full professor.

In the mid-1980s, Cary also inaugurated a prolific career as an editor of scholarly volumes--now numbering at least fifteen--and as a member of various editorial boards (*PMLA*, *Literature and Psychology*, *College Literature*, and so forth). But it was only at the end of the decade that the true significance of his career for our generation of scholars became evident to me.

In 1983, I had heard that Cary organized a conference of national significance on “Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture.” That came as something of a surprise, because I had not particularly associated Cary or his work with Marxism. But then the volume of that name (co-edited with Lawrence Grossberg) appeared in 1988, and it was unmistakable at once that Cary was an adroit and refined theorist of contemporary Marxist schools. One year later, when *Repression and Recovery: Modern American Poetry and the Politics of Cultural Memory, 1910-1945* was published, Cary also displayed the scholarly qualities that instantaneously led me to regard him as a model for myself and others--one with the capacity to enjoin innovative theory with meticulous and fresh research into the very texture of United States cultural history, as seen from the bottom up.

Since that time Cary has complemented his elegant interventions into the academic profession with a steady stream of scholarly volumes that have opened up new regions for research and theorization. Some of these have been pursued by his own extraordinary group of graduate students, such as Stacy Alaimo, Marsha Bryant, Karen Ford, Lawrence Hanley, Jefferson Hendricks, Walter Kalaidjian, Michael Thurston, and Mark Van Wienen (just to mention a few). In addition to books already cited, Cary has served as editor and co-editor of *Edwin Rolfe: A Biographical Essay and Guide* (1990), *Cultural Studies* (1992), *The Collected Poems of Edwin Rolfe* (1993), *Higher Education Under Fire* (1994), *Trees Became Torches: Selected Poems of Edwin Rolfe* (1995), *Madrid 1937* (1996), *Disciplinary and Dissent in Cultural Studies* (1996), *Will Teach for Food* (1997), *The Aura of the Cause* (1997), *The Oxford Anthology of Modern Poetry* (2000), and *The Wound and the Dream: Sixty Years of American Poems About the Spanish Civil War* (2002). Additional books that he has individually authored are *Shouts From the Wall* (1996) and *Revolutionary Memory* (2001).

This avalanche of titles — and I have not touched on his innumerable essays, reviews, and conference papers — is even more astounding when one acknowledges Cary’s exceptional abilities as a writer. Like few others - Perry Anderson, Terry Eagleton, and Michael Berubé come to mind — Cary has the capacity to render the complex luminously lucid without the sacrifice of subtlety. Indeed, it is Cary's mastery of his craft that accounts for an ample part of the impact of his work.

10 So, how does he manage it all? What is the “secret” of Cary’s magnificent balancing of such scholarly attainments with extraordinary activist social commitment, as well as dazzling teaching and mentoring?

It all comes together because Cary’s vision as a scholar is, in fact, the guide to his fierce partisanship for an academic freedom and commitment to a university community vigorously defended by its tenured professors. In the “Introduction” to *Manifesto*, Cary reveals that his rage (often tinged with sardonic humor) at hypocrisy and selfishness in the “actually existing” institutions of English literature is motivated by his love of the potential of the profession: “More perhaps than any other discipline, literary studies has reformed and opened its intellectual life in such a way as to fulfill a commitment to democratic values.” Any doubts about the legitimacy of this claim can be assuaged simply by looking at the remarkable career of Cary Nelson.

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