

IN MEMORIAM

HARRY LEVIN (1912-1994)

Harry Levin, who died in late May, was instrumental in establishing Comparative Literature at Harvard and in the United States. He lectured regularly in Canada and contributed to our journal. The most notable features of Levin's writing are his range, clarity, and insistence on relating literature to its historical context. He presented his substantial learning in a lucid, elegant style. After *The Broken Column* (1931), Levin made seminal contributions in the study of Joyce, Christopher Marlowe, realism in the French novel, modernism, American literature, comedy and Comparative Literature, and in the editing and criticism of Shakespeare.

For Levin, literature is both the cause of social effects and the effect of social causes. He proposes a complex and ironic literary history. Literature represents the part as the whole, involves selection and order, and can suggest additions to nature. Understanding the conventions and contexts of literature is necessary for an audience. Representing art in life results in "a compromise between the possibilities of life and the exigencies of art." Art refracts more than reflects life. To comprehend the angles of refraction, Levin recommends a comparative study of techniques as a complement to an awareness of social backgrounds. Formalism and sociological criticism are complementary frameworks that allow us to distinguish between environment and convention, outside and inside. Both pairs inform the work of art. Writers collaborate with their public. The reader should realize that life and art coexist and that literature is an institution. Realism is a relative term that changes over time. It is a searching and scrupulous critique of life as writers know it at that time. The novel is a mode of knowing.

Levin's theory of comedy complements his theory of realism. He is attracted to comedy partly as a social institution, partly because Aristotle did not codify its rules, and partly because it complicates our view of realism. By taking a pluralistic view, Levin tries to resolve philosophical contradictions in the analysis of comedy. His last book, *Playboys and Killjoys* (1987), supplements his theory of realism in *The Gates of Horn* (1963). It attempts a comparative study of the practice of comedy that Levin can observe empirically and about which he can theorize.

In Levin's work there is a focus in literature, criticism and theory on the growing complexity of our perception of humanity and how genres respond and change accordingly. He never gave up on the idea that we strive to understand reality or the world better through the dream of literature no matter how dream-like the world might appear. After experiencing representations, we journey back into the world. Harry Levin was a person of great dignity. He kept literature and the world in perspective for us. Art is not life but it informs life. He saw literature as a key to a growing wisdom in a changing world.