

Obituario / Obituary

Tom Lewis—A Remembrance

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We lost Tom Lewis in early December of 2018, shortly after his 68th birthday. Although he rarely chose to make a show of it, Tom read voraciously and made a point of staying personally and intellectually engaged with a wide variety of people. In every endeavor he was dedicated and passionate, sometimes to a fault.

Tom completed a BA at Brown University and, in 1978, defended a dissertation on the philosophy of literary realism at the University of California, San Diego. He worked under Fredric Jameson and Susan Kirkpatrick. His committee also included the redoubtable Carlos Blanco Aguinaga. At the start of this work, Tom described how Jameson had warned him early in the process that no one believed in realism after the rise of postmodern theory. That partial rebuke must have inspired a typical Tom response: instead of going with the flow, he pulled back into his own determination and produced a dissertation intended to show that the novel does, in fact, have a referent. Tom was always ready to take a stand like this, on principal, and to back it up with reason, research, and intellectual verve. In the introduction to his dissertation, Tom is quick to point out that his argument was with the American

adherents of Derrida and not so much with Derridianism itself. It's hard to read this now and not hear Tom's baritone voice laughing at the audacity of a younger version of himself. It would seem that his position on the issue of post-structuralism and referentiality, lost during the long dominance of "theory" over academic humanities in the United States, never did become fashionable. Fortunately, Tom could continue laughing at himself and at a great many debates that raged through the academy because his primary battle was not with "Derridianism" or any other school of thought within the university, but with the world.

Tom told me once that he had seen many academics fail to answer the criticism that they were ivory-tower actors who conducted their battles apart from concrete politics. With that sometimes difficult lesson in mind, Tom was a long-standing militant in the International Socialist Organization. Most of his publications were not in academic journals, but in the ISO's *International Socialist Review*. He was especially proud of these articles. They are pieces that combine scholarly research with great insight and Tom's own direct experiences in South American political struggles. He shared this work eagerly and had a diverse intellectual profile that defied complete appreciation.

Towards the end of his life, contemporary research in neuroscience became a keen interest as Tom tried to develop a theory of literary affect rooted in cognition. On the surface this seems like a huge shift, but the University of Iowa was a propitious place for that kind of work because our faculty at that time included Antonio Damasio, a leading figure in neurological research and one of the field's great popularizers. Tom never published most of this work in this area, but he gave several presentations on our campus. It was exciting and the difference of this research from Tom's previous areas of expertise gives powerful testimony to the brilliance of a mind able to make such a huge pivot. It is also an example of how he continued to run against the tide of his own field in order to defend the supposition that human beings create meaning in material ways.

Tom's other battles with the world were institutional. He help to found the Comparative Literature program at the University of Iowa and chaired it before receiving tenure. He was a major figure in developing the Midwestern Modern Language Association. He was twice chair of Spanish and Portuguese here at critical moments in the life of our department and during his second period directing our department, Tom convinced our dean to fund and create one of only three Spanish creative writing MFA degrees in the United States. I can vividly recall when he first told me that he was going to start building some consensus around this plan and pitch it to

the dean. I thought he was crazy. How could an institution in the center of the Midwest attract students interested in pursuing Spanish-language creative writing? We will soon celebrate the ten-year anniversary of this program that was, in its inception, entirely the brainchild of Tom Lewis.

One area in which Tom's life was not at all a battle was with his family. When I first met him, his two sons had yet to begin grade school. Nothing made him happier than raising these boys. They focused Tom, gave him purpose on a daily level, and the knowledge of how much they needed him helped Tom pay proper attention to his own well-being at moments when work and political commitments threatened to become overwhelming. I have rarely seen a man about whom we can more truly say that his life was saved by his children.

Tom was a committed thinker and a thinker of commitment. During his many years at the University of Iowa, he taught thousands of students. Both his former undergraduates and graduate students have gotten in touch with me since his death to remember how funny he could be, how challenging his classes were, and how creatively he approached hugely complex problems and issues. Through many dark times and shadows, Tom could suffer fools with grace and self-awareness. Those of us who often found ourselves playing the fool to his brilliance will mourn the loss of his idealism and practicality, a combination as powerful as it is rare.