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Richard Poirier: A Man of Good Reading
By ALEXANDER STAR

The literary scholar Richard Poirier, who died last weekend at the age of 83, was one of the strong critics of his time. Like Harold Bloom, Pauline Kael and Clement Greenberg, he identified a lineage of artists and introduced a way to make sense of them. For five decades, Mr. Poirier taught literature at Rutgers University, where he founded Raritan, a quarterly named for the river that borders New Brunswick. He reached a broader public by collaborating with another man of letters, Edmund Wilson, to create the Library of America, which continues to assemble a canon of American masterworks, printed on perfectly white acid-free paper to last for the ages.

These were impressive achievements. But Mr. Poirier's most important contribution came in his criticism, which tried to convey why the act of reading is — and should be — so difficult. The most powerful works of literature, he insisted, offer “a fairly direct access to pleasure” but become “on longer acquaintance, rather strange and imponderable.” Even as readers try to pin down what a writer means, the best authors try to elude them, using all the resources of sound, rhythm and syntax to defeat any straightforward account of what they are doing.

This approach to literature is as resonant today as ever. Mr. Poirier's criticism poses a challenge to literary professionals who bemoan that Americans are spending less time with the established classics as well as to Internet enthusiasts who boast that the Web will provide immediate access not only to the best that has been thought and said but to everything else. He reminds us that we should never be complacent about the glories of the canon, which is made up of texts as frustrating and unfinished as ourselves. And he suggests that linking and hyperlinking are no substitute for a sustained encounter with the great writers of the past, who were themselves both tormented and thrilled by “what words were doing to them and what they might do in return.”

Mr. Poirier steadfastly combined cultural authority and idiosyncrasy. He relished being a man apart. Writing in *Partisan Review*, the “little magazine” that defined highbrow culture for generations of New York intellectuals, Mr. Poirier caused a minor scandal when he compared the Beatles' “Sgt. Pepper's” album to the work of Alexander Pope. No less a figure than Saul Bellow later complained that Mr. Poirier had made the magazine “look like a butcher's showcase, shining with pink hairless pigginess, and adorned with figures of hand-carved suet which represent the very latest in art, literature and politics.”

As an English professor, too, Mr. Poirier was often at odds with his colleagues, whom he mockingly compared to bureaucrats: “Criticism in the spirit of the F.D.A. is intended to reduce your consumption of certain of the golden oldies, to reveal consumer fraud in books that for these many years have had a reputation for supplying hard-to-get nutrients.” In the “canon wars” that raged on campuses and beyond in the 1980s —with

multiculturalists feuding with traditionalists — Mr. Poirier faulted both sides. He objected to the belief that literature preserved the highest values of our civilization, but also to the opposed idea that it was deeply complicit with the worst.

For Mr. Poirier the act of writing — in particular the tradition of American writing that ran from Ralph Waldo Emerson to Wallace Stevens — was an assertion of individual power. When authors lost this assertiveness, Mr. Poirier could pounce. Summing up the failures of Truman Capote's late years, he wrote: "After his heroic confrontation with cold blood in Kansas, Capote retreated to a tree house in Manhattan, there to play literary games for ever smaller and overpublicized stakes."

Yet Mr. Poirier was less interested in taking positions on authors than in reading their texts. He mastered this art in Hum 6, a Harvard class he helped teach from 1953 to 1961 with the critic Reuben Brower. An advocate of "reading in slow motion," Mr. Brower asked, simply: "What is it like to read this?"

Mr. Poirier took this question seriously. In painstakingly close readings, he showed that poets like Robert Frost and Stevens and a novelist like Norman Mailer seek to trumpet their individual voice, but when they do so, they find that they are using words that are not truly their own or that they are imprisoned by previous self-definitions. "Struggling for his identity within the materials at hand," they "show us, in the mere turning of a sentence this way or that, how to keep from being smothered by the inherited structuring of things," Mr. Poirier wrote.

The principal hero of this struggle was Emerson, whose reputation Mr. Poirier did much to redefine, challenging the familiar view of him as a facile optimist, a woozy metaphysician or an enabler of laissez-faire capitalism. Nor would Emerson have embraced the modern notion of "the self as something put together by a person who is then required to express it and to ask others to confirm it as an identity." Rather, he saw the self as something very much like what Frost called a poem: "a momentary stay against confusion."

Tracing Emerson's famous twistings and turnings, Mr. Poirier argued that even when he seemed most complacent, for instance in his notorious observation, "Do not tell me, as a good man did today, of my obligation to put all poor men in good situations. Are they my poor?" Emerson cannot be taken at face value. He is actually quarreling with others and with himself, and in doing so, Mr. Poirier wrote, he "sounds curiously half proud of his responses and half agitated by them."

Mr. Poirier himself cherished self-contradiction. He helped enshrine the nation's literary classics at the Library of America, but he also wrote that "works of art are not required to exist. There is nothing outside of them that requires their existence. If Shakespeare had never existed we would not miss his works, for there would be nothing missing."

Literature, in other words, was not sacred or even necessary. But it mattered enormously, because, at its most potent, it insisted that we not take ourselves, or our words, for

granted. “We ought to be grateful to language,” Mr. Poirier wrote, “for making life messier than ever.”

Or, as Wallace Stevens put it in a poem Mr. Poirier quoted again and again, “Speech is not dirty silence/Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier.”