

**MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON**

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITUS LAWRENCE S. DEMBO

Lawrence S. Dembo, professor emeritus of English, died at the age of 73 on December 5, 2002, after a brave battle with Parkinson's disease that had continued over many years. Widely acclaimed as a literary critic, journal editor, and inspiring teacher, he was forced by his illness to retire in 1990 at the age of 60, and to bring his twenty-five years of teaching at this university to a premature close. But his creative pursuit of the life of the mind was to continue long after he could no longer engage directly with his students in the classroom.

Larry was born in Troy, New York, on December 3, 1929, where he grew to early manhood. He graduated from Syracuse University in 1951, proceeded to Columbia University, where he received his master's degree in 1952, and began doctoral study at Cornell University. He was married the same year to Royce Benderson, a musician whom he had come to know at Syracuse, where she had been a fellow student of his after finishing her studies at the Eastman School of Music. Larry received his Ph.D. from Cornell in 1955, and soon afterwards was inducted into the Navy as an ensign. In recognition of his facility with languages, he was sent to the Army Language School in Monterey, California, where he spent the next year studying and mastering Mandarin Chinese. Following his graduation, Larry was stationed in Taiwan, where for the next two years he served as a naval intelligence officer. During his stay on Taiwan he also taught American literature at National Taiwan University, conducting his classes in Chinese. Decommissioned from the Navy in 1959 with the rank of Lieutenant Junior Grade, Larry returned to Cornell, where he taught for a year before joining UCLA as an assistant professor in 1960. Except for the year 1963-64, when he taught American literature at the Université Montpellier on a Fulbright Lectureship, Larry spent the next five years at UCLA, where he quickly established a national reputation as an acute critic of modern American poetry with three books written and published in quick succession: *Hart Crane's Sanskrit Charge: a Study of the Bridge*, published in 1960, *The Confucian Odes of Ezra Pound: a Critical Appraisal*, which appeared in 1963, and *Conceptions of Reality in Modern American Poetry*, which followed shortly afterwards. Small wonder that in 1965 this university brought the young assistant professor here as a full professor.

Shortly after joining the English Department, Larry took over the editorship of a small and struggling journal, *Wisconsin Studies in Contemporary Literature*, renamed it *Contemporary Literature*, and within a few years had transformed it into one of the most widely respected literary journals in the United States. Thanks to the energy and imagination of Larry's editorship, the audience for *Contemporary Literature* steadily grew along with its prestige, to the point where it is today considered one of the leading forums in which current literary movements are traced and assessed. One of the most significant of Larry's editorial innovations was the series of special issues of *Contemporary Literature* devoted to a single topic, many of which have been subsequently published as independent books by the University of Wisconsin Press, attracting in this format even wider attention than when they first appeared. Larry was himself responsible for six of these volumes over the years, which included in many cases important interviews he had conducted with major contemporary novelists and poets, among them Jorge Luis Borges and the prominent Swedish novelists Sara Lidman and Per Olaf Sundman, both of whom he had interviewed in Stockholm. Among the honors that Larry received in recognition of his distinction as both a critic and an editor were a Guggenheim fellowship in 1968-69 and an ACLS fellowship in 1977-78.

A few years before his retirement in 1990, Larry undertook a formidably ambitious project. He proposed to write and publish three volumes of critical literary studies that he hoped would eventually constitute a trilogy. The first of these volumes, *The Monological Jew: A Literary Study*, was published in 1988, and
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the second, *Detotalized Totalities: Synthesis and Disintegration in Naturalist, Existential, and Social Fiction*, appeared the following year, 1989. Upon his retirement the next year, Larry began work on the third volume, to be entitled "The Dialectics of Aesthetic Revolution," and he persisted with it over the next few years, completing some three-quarters of the manuscript before his steadily declining health made it impossible for him to continue.

During these early years of retirement Larry also took up an entirely new creative venture. He began writing poetry, in which he revealed a rich and unexpected talent. Some of his poems were published in various poetry magazines, and eventually he began to select and assemble them for a volume he hoped to publish under the title, "Vanishing Point." But here too his physical condition frustrated his plans.

In the end, Larry Dembo had to leave some projects unfinished, some hopes unfulfilled. So must we all, often with far fewer obstacles than those he faced with each new day. But he succeeded in leaving behind him a sizable and important legacy: published books and articles of distinguished criticism, a flourishing literary journal, the acclaim of his students; perhaps most of all, an example of courage, tenacity, and patient endurance for which all who knew him will treasure his memory.

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