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# Remembering Ray Smith

GREG JOHNSON

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PATIENCE. TACT. KINDNESS. These are some of the qualities most often mentioned by the friends of Raymond J. Smith, who passed away on February 18, 2008 at the age of seventy-seven. As the editor and publisher of the distinguished literary magazine *Ontario Review* and of Ontario Review Press, and as the husband of novelist Joyce Carol Oates, Ray led a rich and full life devoted not only to his work and his marriage but also to numerous friends in the Princeton area and beyond.

Born on March 12, 1930 to a Roman Catholic family — his father was an automobile salesman, his mother had taught elementary school before her marriage — Ray developed his literary interests early in life. Like many a would-be writer in the 1950s, Ray moved to Greenwich Village with ambitions of becoming a novelist; there he wrote a number of short stories and a couple of novels while supporting himself with various jobs such as clerking in an export office and proofreading. But his fiction “never panned out,” he later recalled, so he decided that if he wanted a career, he should enroll in an English Ph.D. program. He decided on the University of Wisconsin, where he focused on the eighteenth century and worked with the department’s highly regarded Jonathan Swift scholar, Ricardo Quintana.

Ray was in his last year of doctoral studies in 1960, the year he met Joyce at a faculty tea. He recalled that his attraction to Joyce “was an emotional and romantic one, but more importantly, I found Joyce a very open and warm and yet modest young woman. It was easy to talk with her — our conversations seemed effortless.” Joyce gave Ray an offprint of an article she had published on Samuel Beckett, and Ray “glimpsed the quality of intellect and imaginative boldness of the girl I was to marry. I was awed.” The relationship developed swiftly. They met on October 23, became engaged on November 23, and married on January 23, 1961.

Joyce later noted in her journal that she and Ray were not just married; they were “intensely married,” rarely spending a night apart during the next forty-seven years. As a husband, Ray remained

a source of support and strength during the 1960s and 1970s, as Joyce's career began its meteoric and sometimes controversial rise. Ray was a success in his own right, becoming English department chair at the University of Windsor and publishing a critical study of the eighteenth-century satiric poet Charles Churchill. In her journal she stressed Ray's personal qualities that so perfectly complemented her own:

Ray's sense of humor. Intelligence. Kindness. Patience. (Though he is not *always* patient.) Easily hurt; but not inclined to brood; not at all "philosophical" (as I am); perhaps a sunnier nature; or at least a less dense one. My conviction, the first evening we met, that I would marry this man, that I would fall in love with him . . . . An uncanny certainty.

Some of Ray's friends cite his mutually supportive relationship with Joyce as one of the most remarkable things about him, and remember them fondly as a couple. Gloria Vanderbilt, for instance, whose artwork was featured in *Ontario Review*, remarked that "In my mind's eye and in my heart this lovely man Ray Smith will always be by Joyce's side." Edmund White, a colleague of Joyce's in the Princeton creative writing program, likewise became a friend of the couple: "I can picture them sitting on opposite ends of the couch under the twin floor lamps and listening to recordings of Chopin, reading and working, writing and correcting proof. They thought of themselves as 'lazy,' but never was there a more disciplined and productive couple, yet the discipline never felt harsh. They were doing what they wanted to do and with the ideal companion."

From the late 1970s to as recently as January 2008, the distinguished feminist scholar Elaine Showalter (a professor emerita of Princeton's English department) and her husband, English Showalter, were close friends of Ray and Joyce. The Showalters now live in London half the year, where the Smiths visited them occasionally. "Ray loved London," Elaine recalls, "and especially the liveliness and energy of literary life, the humming activity of the streets in Islington where we live, the mix of cultures, races, nationalities." From three decades of friendship one of the images that stays in Elaine's mind is the memory of "Ray in the wonderful vegetable garden he planted in Princeton, and his explaining to me about 'volunteers,' plants you didn't mean to have that just spring up, if I remember properly. We made a lot of jokes

about that term and its implications." Another vivid memory is of Ray and Joyce "dancing joyously to the DJ at my daughter's wedding in Princeton — not the only time we were at a dance party with them, but the only time, I think, when there were a lot of younger people present, from Princeton graduate students to my daughter's friends from all over, who were quite awed by being in the presence of this famous literary couple, and amazed to see them rocking out."

Though they socialized together as a couple, Ray and Joyce maintained distinctly separate identities in their work lives. In addition to his editorial and publishing work, Ray took care of many of the routine household duties so that Joyce could pursue her creative work. Edmund White puts it this way: "Although Joyce has always been the star in the family, I always felt that Ray was the stage-manager. . . . He drove the car, paid the dinner check, arranged for the insurance, paid the taxes — all the machinery of life he manned, leaving Joyce free to daydream and write." While he found them both "wonderful, thoughtful, generous hosts with a genuine appetite for socializing," Ray had his own distinctive charm. "Ray was so kind, so twinkly, so quick to catch the joke, so gently satirical about the foibles of our friends — he didn't have to say anything, it was all there, sparkling in his regard. He led an exemplary life."

A major part of that life, of course, was his work as editor and publisher of *Ontario Review* and Ontario Review Press, and numerous writers over the years have been gratified by the great care he took with these endeavors, and with his authors personally. White was one of these: "I've known several writers (I'm one of them) who'd been man-handled by New York editors and who turned with relief to Ray's thoughtfulness and politeness and genuine perspicacity. He was a superb line-editor. His taste was flawless."

Albert Goldbarth, one of Ray's favorite contemporary poets, contributed work to Ray's journal for the past twenty-five years. Goldbarth has saved every note that Ray sent him over the years, and says that "in every jot of Ray Smith's side of the vast accumulation of paper implied in this, the wit and generosity, the liberal humanity, the abundant love of getting every editorial detail hammered down just right, is evident. He was a warm, gently intelligent and civilized presence at the other end of that quarter-century of mailed envelopes, singular as a person and, sadly, increasingly rare as a type." He remembers that Ray and Joyce often sent personal notes with their acceptance letters, adding "a personal touch . . . to what would otherwise be boilerplate negotiation."

Thanks to the strong reputation of *Ontario Review* in the literary world, Ray was able to attract such distinguished contributors as John Updike and Margaret Atwood, but he prided himself on finding and publishing writers at the beginning of their careers as well. One of these was Joyce's former Princeton student Pinckney Benedict, whose collection of stories *Town Smokes*, published by Ontario Review Press in 1987 when the author was only twenty-three, was one of Ray's most successful titles. At that time, Benedict recalls, he "had no idea — because I'd published very little and had never had another editor outside the classroom — what good care he was taking of me and of the book." Later professional experiences, Benedict notes, made him realize that he was "blessed by Ray from the very beginning and far above any merits I might have possessed." For instance, when sending royalty checks Ray would always include a personal note. "The notes were doubtless second nature to Ray," Benedict says, "and I never communicated to him how precious they became to me."

Another grateful author published by the magazine and the press was Sheila Kohler, who recalls that Ray initially rejected her submission of a novel, "but with the kind of letter that is rarely sent with a rejection — a helpful one." Ray later accepted a collection of her stories, and she vividly recalls first meeting Ray and Joyce in person one rainy evening in 2002. "The couple immediately put me at ease. Ray looked at me with his signature benevolent gaze and spoke very kindly of my stories. I realized to my surprise that he had read them very carefully — always the ultimate compliment to a writer." Ultimately, Kohler says, "Publishing with The Ontario Review Press was in every way a wonderful experience." Kohler later published a second book, a novel, with the press, and she remembers him as "diligent and patient, willing to sit on the telephone and make small corrections of punctuation and style. He made larger suggestions, too, pointing out contradictions and confusion in the text, but never forcing an opinion or insisting on anything if I felt it was not right. . . . Here, I thought, was someone who was interested in the product rather than in himself. I felt that it was possible to grow as a writer, to blossom, in the sun of such interest and appreciation."

Beginning in the late 1970s, when I was a graduate student at Emory University, I worked with Ray often, being fortunate enough to have a number of stories and other work published in the magazine, and to publish three books with the press; my experience was similar to Benedict's and Kohler's. With Joyce as his associate editor, Ray attended carefully to every detail regarding my books, tactfully



steering me away from inappropriate cover art that I suggested, making helpful suggestions during every phase of the publishing process. Knowing that I was only one of dozens of writers he helped to promote, I found the amount of work he did, and the care with which he did it, to be nothing less than astonishing.

Ray and Joyce began publishing *Ontario Review* in 1974, when both were still teaching at the University of Windsor in Windsor, Ontario; by 1978, when they moved to Princeton, the magazine already had a distinguished reputation and so the name of the magazine remained unchanged. (Ray and Joyce together have more than once been compared to Leonard and Virginia Woolf, who likewise worked out of their home to publish literary titles with their Hogarth Press.) In an essay called "On Editing *The Ontario Review*," Ray once wrote that a distinct feature of the magazine was "its character as a North American journal of the arts — 'North American,' I say, though for purely practical reason it focuses mainly on the English-speaking cultures of the continent. As Americans teaching in Canada, in the border city of Windsor, knowledgeable about the literary traditions and in contact with writers of both countries, Joyce and I felt that we were in a fine position to start such a journal."

Despite the manifold problems involved with publishing a magazine — for instance, dealing with printers, and with well-known authors who might submit an inferior piece of work — Ray stressed the many rewards of his endeavor. "I see editing a magazine not as *compiling* but *creating*," he wrote, "and the finished product as a work of art in its own right . . . . The rewards of the job are many — discovering a well-shaped and compelling story or poem by a previously unpublished writer, watching hitherto disconnected material gradually assume a focus, getting some positive reactions from people you admire. Finally, the editor, for better or worse, contributes (no matter how little) to the shaping of a culture. He need not, and perhaps should not, be doctrinaire; nevertheless, he will have values — aesthetic, cultural, even moral, that will be reflected in what he chooses to publish. I have never thought of it this way before, but I suppose that the *Ontario Review*, whether quixotically or not, is tilting with the dragon of anti-art — resisting the deadening commercialism of modern Western civilization."

Such thoughtfulness and purpose underlay all of Ray's work with the magazine and the press over a publishing career of more than thirty years.

For those who knew Ray, however, his personal qualities are what

will most be missed. On a couple of occasions I “house-sat” for Ray and Joyce when they went on a rare extended trip, and what most stays in my memory is Ray showing me how to care for their two cats, their canary, and their plants. No detail was too small for him to discuss, and it struck me that he was a naturally nurturing person, whether dealing with animals, his garden, his authors, his friends, or his wife.

No one, of course, has been more eloquent in enumerating his special qualities than Joyce, who often has written in her journal about her husband. Noting that her marriage has “made my life stable,” she again listed her husband’s virtues: “Kindly, loving, sweet, at times critically intelligent, sensitive, funny, unambitious, w/a love for idleness that matches my own. Ray is an extraordinary person whose depths are not immediately obvious.” Two years later, she noted similarly: “He is an extraordinary person, in a number of respects: his kindness, his good nature, his sense of humor, his wit (which is so rarely shown in public), his reserve, shyness, intelligence . . . sweetness . . . . That he should be so *sweet*, and that I should have guessed so . . . what a miracle.”

This “extraordinary person” will be greatly missed by all of those whose lives he touched. Perhaps Pinckney Benedict puts it best when he writes: “Ray was a thoroughly gracious, humane, humble and learned gentleman of a kind I don’t believe they make anymore . . . . What an inexpressibly good man.”