# Tom McFarland

a tribute by

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IN 1987 THE UNIVERSITY IOWA PRESS issued an unusual monograph entitled *Shapes of Culture*. The argumentative thrust of the book was that modern intellectual culture had become deeply fissiparous in nature, continually spawning sub-disciplines and micro-specialisms that concerned themselves with ever more recondite and conceptually isolated subject matters—more and more about less and less—without supplying the means that allowed one to 'only connect' as Forster would have said.

The tragic *leitmotif* of what was itself a tour de force of erudite reference across a wide spectrum of the humanities and sciences was that the age of the 'polymath' was officially at an end. No longer were there minds capable of traversing '*strange seas of thought'* and in so doing surveying the multiple continents that constitute the geography and geology of knowledge in order to discern connectivities between them. In other words the chances of modern culture throwing up another Aristotle, a second Leibniz, a 21st century Coleridge were and are negligible.

The author of this remarkable (and not very well known) volume was Thomas McFarland, 'Tom' to his friends who collectively mourn his death, announced in September of 2011, at the age of 84.

I suppose (and contention will always greet such pronouncements) there has been a troika of great North American Coleridge scholars in the 20th century. Chronologically there was John Livingstone Lowes whose *The Road to Xanadu* demonstrated the fruits of applying 'German' standards of scholarship to the works of Coleridge who was himself a pioneer of Q*uellenkritik*. He was followed by Kathleen Coburn (a redoubtable Canadian of course) whose tenacity and vision literally created modern Coleridge studies as incarnated in the *Bollingen Edition* of the Collected Works, and in her marvellous edition of Coleridge's Notebooks. Then there was Tom, who began as a Shakespeare scholar and then succumbed in his late thirties to the manifold blandishments of the anxiety-ridden Devonian drug addict, conversationalist, pioneer mountaineer, poet and quester for the *omne scibile* that was STC.

My own baptism into Coleridge was reading Tom's magnificent *Coleridge and the Pantheist Tradition* (Oxford 1969) in the late 70s and being bowled over by the effervescent and seemingly limitless scholarship within its pages. I've been a committed Coleridgean ever since but my admiration of Tom's scholarship has been equally long lasting and fervent.

Tom wrote another 10 substantial monographs (two on Shakespeare, one on Wordsworth, one on Keats, a collective study of Lamb, Hazlitt and De Quincey and several on Romanticism in general) each and every one of which was characterized by his eloquent prose, the ever more recondite and wide-ranging references and the influence of German thought and scholarship. Few of his pieces were composed without at least one reference to some aspect of

Heidegger's thought (or 'mentation' as Tom would usually put it). In addition to the monographs we now have his long-awaited edition of Coleridge's most fragmentary yet central undertaking—the fabled *Opus Maximum* (Princeton/Bollingen 2002).

One could write a monograph on Tom's work but if pressed I would say it focused, certainly when it came to Romanticism, on the paradoxical and ambiguous relationship within this European-wide movement in general, and specifically in the life and work of Coleridge, on the tendency towards synthesis and holism on the one hand ('reticulation' was Tom's preferred term) and the urge towards the sundered fragment and the metaphysics of incompletion (in Tom-speak this was 'diasparaction') on the other.

The tension and ambivalence between desire and reality, the essentially tragic antithesis of hope and unfulfillment, were themes that wove their tangled way throughout Tom's work. Even Shakespearean comedy and tragedy were, for Tom, the pinnacle of artistic expression in the face of a human existence moulded and sometimes deformed to destruction by life's tectonic forces. Coleridge's life and work were, for Tom, the quintessential living stage upon which such forces had their play.

Tom's great *Pantheist Tradition* was his hymn to reticulation and his profoundly suggestive *Romanticism and the Forms of Ruin* (Princeton 1981) was an equally imaginative exploration of the trope of the incomplete and fragmentary in Romanticism. Within the latter volume are wonderful essays on Coleridge's existential anxiety and a masterpiece on the idea of 'Polarity' within European culture.

Tom's collective study *Romantic Cruxes* (Oxford 1987) contains a quite brilliant analysis of Romanticism as a movement of thought and spirit in science, in literature and in philosophy—a *Zeitgeist* that truly encapsulated, in Coleridge's phrase 'the visible organismus of the whole silent or elementary life of nature'.

Of course Tom on the page was inspiring and suggestive, but Tom in the flesh was the greatest treat of all for those lucky enough to be his friends. His legendary podium lectures in Grasmere and Cannington for the respective annual Wordsworth Summer and bi-ennial Coleridge Conferences will be fondly treasured by his auditors. I recall how excited I felt as I listened to his spell-binding lecture on *Coleridge and Samothrace* and Tom's detective-like unravelling of the connections between late Coleridge's after dinner conversation and the deepest mysteries of trinitarianism and the logos in European mythology.

The first thing one noticed about Tom was his sheer physical presence. A great bear of a man with glinting eye and Alabama southern drawl whose silhouette on the Fells with walking stick and backpack animatedly discoursing about his beloved STC's omniscience as he bent his head earthwards is unforgettable.

The knowledge that never again will his exuberant bonhomie and kindness of spirit grace those Lakeland mountains or lecture podia that he frequented

for so many decades is a cause of real sadness for his many friends and admirers.

Tom took Coleridge's prose works as seriously as he took his poetry, perhaps more so. For him Coleridge was above all a great thinker whose thoughts on theology, science and philosophy were of a piece and were themselves profound. Tom was a great student of the history of scholarship and was determined to contextually place Coleridge within the great arc of intellectual history in Europe. To accomplish this task required an erudition as wide ranging as Coleridge's own and Tom was uniquely placed to do this. Tom followed where Coleridge led and if this meant reading his way through a *mare magnum* of recondite literature or placing his feet physically on the most vertiginous of Cumbrian pathways then so be it!

Partly the gravitational pull of Coleridge was the attraction of kindred spirits, as Massignon to Al-Hallaj. Coleridge's deep spirituality, his almost Scaligerian erudition, his physical recklessness—all appealed to Tom at the deepest levels as did the diasparactive neuroses and anxieties that made life a torment for Coleridge and with which Tom had deep communion.

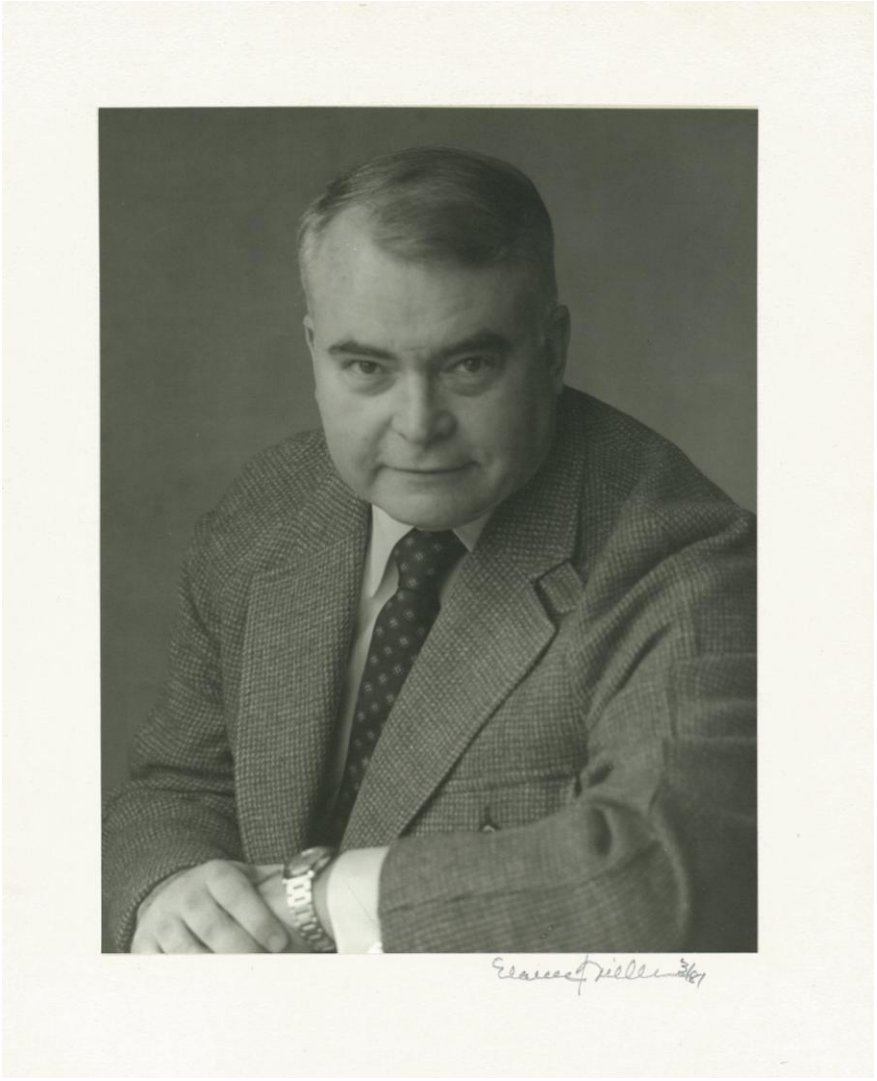
In 1989 an incident occurred in Princeton involving a student that at the very least displayed a damaging lack of judgement on Tom's part. The local *cause celebre* that ensued effectively put an end to what had been an immensely distinguished professional career. Tom never fully recovered from the negative (if factually ignorant) publicity he received and the enforced retirement that was imposed upon him. He suffered a debilitating stroke that was exacerbated by the onset of diabetes. To this was added the inevitable ostracism of the academic community and if it were not for the almost daily ministrations of one or two close friends who lived nearby one wonders if Tom would have survived at all.

It is unfortunate that the publisher of the Bollingen Edition of Coleridge decided at this time, for financial reasons, to cut a great deal of the admittedly mammoth typescript of his edition of the *Opus Maximum* fragments. All of Tom's introductions to the separate fragments were left on the cutting room floor as were portions of his 'Prolegomena' to the edition. This was a cause of great pain to Tom as he had intermittently laboured over this edition for a quarter of a century. It is hoped that the excised fragments will eventually be published in an edition of Tom's unpublished work currently being planned.

Born in Birmingham Alabama in 1926, Tom attended Phillips Exeter Academy in New Hampshire, an institution with a Socratic tradition, a method of teaching which influenced Tom's own pedagogy in later years. Tom went on to become an undergraduate at Harvard and decided to attend rival Yale for his post-graduate studies mainly because of the impression made on him by the gentle civility of the Boswell scholar Frederick Pottle who remained for him the paradigm of what the gentleman-scholar should literally 'be'. Post-doctoral work in Tubingen followed which doubtless perfected Tom's German and increased his respect for German culture and scholarship.

Thereafter Tom taught at a number of universities—Oberlin, University of

Virginia, Western Reserve—before spending in many ways his most productive years at the Graduate Centre of City College of New York, an institution whose ambience and ethos remained closest to his heart. Translation to the neo-Gothic elysium of Princeton as Murray Professor followed but Tom never really fell in love with Princeton which he felt to be a community somewhat aloof and coldly remote. Ultimately his feelings of alienation and reserve were to prove tragically self-fulfilling. Tom's final years were spent in Boca Raton where climate and the cost of living are kinder.



I'm sure many of Tom's friends lost contact with him in these years which appear to have signalled a period of mental as well as physical withdrawal and infirmity. What remains are the memories of a gargantuan vitality and appetite for ideas, for books (Tom had a magnificent personal library which it is hoped

will remain intact), for good wine and food, for stimulating conversation and above all for the simple yet profound enjoyment of the coming together of mind and nature in a mutual embrace whose greatest celebrant was the Coleridge who remained Tom's closest confidant. For Tom, as for Coleridge, the senses were truly living outgrowths, organs rather than mere components of mind and spirit. One embraced nature as one embraced the warmth of friendship, in identical ways.

There are also the monographs, editions and papers which will continue to inspire and challenge future generations studying the incarnation of the Romantic spirit within print. Tom was never convinced by post-modern approaches to literary texts. Both deconstruction as practised ubiquitously in the post 60s by Derrida's many epigones as well as the New Historicism of Greenblatt and his school were for Tom incapable of discerning and expressing the uniqueness of 'value' of a text in terms of both its substantive 'textural' content (with the intended connotation of structure and tactility) and its incarnation as a culturally mediated 'shape' or 'form'. Texts should never be reduced or deconstructed to mere homogenized 'text'.

The first and final task of criticism must be the apprehension of 'quality' which alone gives 'value' as a dividend to the reader. This was Tom's methodological credo which, although currently unfashionable, he hoped would be restored to its rightful place in canon formation. Ultimately, Tom saw Romanticism as a vast, almost tactile, structure of thought and feeling that required both the hand and eye of the critic to discern the profound richness of spirit revealed by such a unique cultural tapestry. Indeed Tom's *Nachlass* includes a finished book-length manuscript on the University and the Literary Canon which it is again hoped will be posthumously published in the planned collection mentioned above.

I conclude with a personal reminiscence. I visited Tom one snowy January in 2001 in Princeton. He was already suffering from diabetes and post-stroke complications and when we decided to go out for a meal he needed my help to dress and to ease his still powerful frame into the waiting cab.

We had a marvellous dinner lubricated by copious amounts of red wine and leavened by Tom's scintillating conversation, store of memory and opinionated invective. Returning home Tom was in mellow frame of mind and decided to reward my pilgrimage to visit him by allowing me to take away a copy of his 'Prolegomena' to the as yet unpublished edition of the *Opus Maximum.*

He packed up the 500 page typescript and off I went to Princeton Junction and the New York train. I don't think Tom quite realized what a coveted treasure he'd given me as I'd been waiting ten years to read this by now legendary piece of work. I recalled the feelings of the 17th century physician George Ent who visited the great William Harvey in 1648, already seventy years of age and infirm, and who allowed Ent to leave with the unique manuscript of Harvey's epoch-making treatise on embryology, the *De Generatione Animalium.* My sense of privilege was of the same order.

The following summer I visited him again and for dessert this time he

allowed me to take away the rest of the edition, all one thousand pages of it. This was the enormous generosity of spirit of the man. A tad too generous perhaps, for after returning to London I found an urgent message from Tom asking me to return the typescript as it was his only copy!

My final memory is of him at the door of his Westerley Road house, waving farewell and urging me to return when next in town. Even in infirmity his frame appeared to engulf the doorway and his smile to radiate beyond the confines of his front porch. As a scholar and as a person Tom was *sui generis*. The final words on Tom should fittingly be Coleridge's defence of

> *the blessed Organ of Language… to support all old & venerable Truths, to support, to kindle, to project, to make the Reason spread Light over our Feelings, to make our Feelings diffuse vital Warmth thro' our Reason… these are my Objects… & these my Subjects.*

That was Tom. *Te Salutamus.*