

Two Poets:

John Tagliabue and Tony Quagliano

In Memoriam John Tagliabue

Grace Tagliabue wrote us on October 14, 2006:

A week or so ago *Spring* 13 arrived and I realized I had neglected to notify you that John died on May 31st. He had been operated on for pancreatic cancer and due to complications did not survive.

Needless to say, I suppose you can imagine the sad and confusing time it has been for his family. Just now I am beginning to try to deal with matters that should have been taken care of during the time of his hospitalization and after his death. It was devastating—a great upheaval—we had been married for almost 60 years.

Sincerely,

Grace Tagliabue

John Tagliabue was a much-loved teacher and colleague at Bates College in Lewiston, Maine. Professor Carole Ann Taylor wrote the following “Memorial Minute” for him:

John A. Tagliabue Memorial Minute

Carole Ann Taylor

The traditional memorial minute was read at the Sept. 11, 2006, faculty meeting at Bates College by Carole Ann Taylor, Professor of English, for the late Professor Emeritus of English John A. Tagliabue.

Source: <http://www.bates.edu/x146167.xml>

For John Tagliabue, who devoted 36 years to Bates as teacher, colleague, friend, raconteur and poet laureate, neither a memorial minute, nor even two voices, begins to suffice. Everyone who knew him has their favorite John stories, inadequately represented here. But we hope you'll indulge us in rather more than a minute and remember this renowned American poet by reading his poems again or for the first time.

John was born in Cantu, Italy, in 1923, to a restaurateur father who encouraged John to dance for customers and a mother whose wit as a

storyteller, even in advanced age in Lewiston, helped to explain the phenomenon of John. He received a B.A. and an M.A. from Columbia University, where he became a lifelong friend of Allen Ginsberg and knew such countercultural icons as William Burroughs and Jack Kerouac.

But John preferred celebration even then, hung out with dancers, and, in 1946, married his life-partner Grace, a visual artist and fellow visionary whose glad kindness, it did not take a poet to recognize, warrants her name. He would teach in Beirut and several other places before coming to Bates in 1953, at a time when he was expected to get President Charles Phillips' approval for any poems that he read or published. During the McCarthy era, at a time when faculty of color were few and far between and gay faculty knew that to be outed would mean summary dismissal, no doubt John's and Grace's support of civil rights, gay rights and the anti-war and anti-nuclear movements seemed to some dubious engagements. But with extraordinary charm to assist him, John negotiated this terrain by enriching and subverting simultaneously, with such liberatory and allusive poetic reference that a censor never stood a chance.

By the time I arrived in the late '70s, his merged poetic and institutional personae had become so artful that I would have to learn that his studiously ethereal persona disguised a selective but extremely well-organized competence. (He wrote: "Does any one mail more mail than I do? / I don't think so: not even Sears Roebuck, / not even seals spouting on their way to one / of their favorite really pleasurable resorts do....") His colleague of the time Bud Rovett tells a story of walking across the Quad with John and running into President Phillips, for whom John performed a spontaneously hyperbolic encomium to the spring, the birds and the character of infinite wonder until the President managed his formal departure and John turned to his friend and said, "Well, no more committees for another year."

And yet, on his own terms, he gave unstintingly generous gifts to the College. Among Bates's many wonderful teachers, probably no one has been more often invoked or remembered as legendary while still alive, and nobody could match John for how well he kept in touch with former students all over the world. John's pedagogy, which relied on inspired preparation, involved arriving early to cover the blackboard with brilliantly diverse and relevant quotations, the excitement of crosscultural connections in graphic juxtaposition. Becoming what he was doing, he would arrive in black to teach Hamlet or in a bright multicolored striped sweater to talk

about Shakespearean fools. An avid and perceptive world traveler who had six Fulbrights, he taught in Greece, Spain, Brazil, Italy, Japan and the People's Republic of China; and at Bates, he was the first to teach Asian and other world literatures beyond the European. And, of course, he acted as the first mentor for many who became littérateurs in their own right. He saw his task clearly: to foster a love of literature so intense that it would last his students' lifetimes. Appropriately, they found him "Buddhaesque," full of spiritually informed laughter and wisdom (my son was sure that whoever designed Yoda must have known John first). And abundant testimony suggests that he never failed to enact what he taught in a pedagogy at once lyrical, dramatic and utopian in its energies.

I'll offer here just a couple of comments from a memorial Web site started by Richard Carlson that also includes some of John's last poems and correspondence, and hope it will suggest the character of his effect on students. John Holt wrote: "He was the Sage of Lewiston and the light that woke us up.... He was the Buddha Uproar at dawn on Mount David, masked dancer, Dionysian spirit, Vishnu by the Androscoggin." And Diane Davies speaks for many: "...the world needs to hear more of his work. Those of us who knew and loved him were very lucky indeed. It is shocking, like he used to say the death of Mercutio was shocking, to see so much vitality snuffed out forever. So that he may not wholly die then, do what you can to keep his poetry alive."

As colleague, that vitality brought us all daily delight. John's early rounds made poems appear on our doors before we arrived, often geared specifically to us. If you'd given him a weird-shaped potato from your garden, say, by the following day it might become the Willendorf Venus making out with Wittgenstein. He involved us in the annual United Nations of Poetry in his living room, where students and teachers alike brought and read poetry across the cultures, as well as in such rich imaginative productions as the fantastical Mario Puppet Plays. Always the singer of praise songs for humble moments or great thinkers, he treated literary, cultural discussions with anyone as worthy of the highest seriousness. And since he celebrated his colleagues, friends and students with the same effusive glee that springs from his poems (indeed, often in the poems), he made us all want to live up to such high description.

The first four volumes of poetry—*Poems* (1950); *A Japanese Journal* (1966); *The Buddha Uproar* (1970); and *The Doorless Door* (1970)—preceded two later collections ranging over many years, *The Great*

Day: Poems, 1962-1983, and *New and Selected Poems: 1942-1997*. Those lauding John as a poet read like a Who's Who in American poetry, including Gwendolyn Brooks ("a shrewd candor that includes beauty, music and an exciting energy"); Hayden Carruth ("a thread of sanity in the general murk, a constant music"); John Ciardi ("like common daylight coruscating through a prism"); Amy Clampit ("a Franciscan act of courtesy and praise"); Denise Levertov ("profuse and various, combin[ing] innocence and knowledge in an unique way"); and X. J. Kennedy, who called him "the Shelleyan colossus of the North." Locally, John mined the Bates world for lyrical incentives and always surprised, from "Highest Honors; coolness breeze" to my favorite, the poem called "To Dedicate a Library," read on the inauguration of Ladd Library. Several talk of reviving the puppet plays, and you may now see some of Grace's miraculous puppets on display in Ladd. John's poetic stature continues to grow, and Syracuse University has archived his notebooks, journals and correspondence.

When poets came to visit, John frequently introduced them with a praise-poem of his own, so it's most fitting that Rob perform that function here. But because John was so fond of the luminous detail, I want to end with a personal image of John, who, although Grace grew gorgeous flowers, was in much too intimate communion with nature to own a lawnmower. Nevertheless, when a neighbor mentioned that John's unkempt grass was spilling through the fence, he took Grace's largest scissors and plopped himself down in sundry spots to cut concentric circles around himself, producing a temple-like configuration of these stunningly mystical donuts. So we, too, should "weave a circle around him thrice" (*Kubla Khan*), because he has "drunk the milk of paradise," and be grateful, in his words, that:

moment by moment we were
granted all this
verbal eternity.

—*Bates College, Lewiston, Maine*

Letter from John Tagliabue, August 9, 2005

I've always had *much* affection & admiration for the work of E. E. Cummings. That's been a long good fortune; it startles me to think that I am now beyond age 82! From the time I was a young Columbia College stu-

dent in NYC when Mark Van Doren was my most helpful teacher and when I knew José García Villa, a young poet then (1941-45) and great admirer of Cummings, I've been entertained and educated by Cummings' poems & his *six nonlectures* & so on.

Glad to get your notes about *Spring* a few days ago. Back a year ago—in August 2004—I received a farewell letter from Norman Friedman. I hope he is well. He had written a good essay for *Spring* relating Cummings & my poems; and *Spring* had published my poems often; Norman said he was giving you a group of poems I sent him. I've been wondering what's been happening to the magic [?]-& to those poems of mine. What are the plans with them.

Visitors just arrived—so I'll write more to you after hearing from you. You have all my best wishes in your new work devoted to a poet we much admire. I think that I sent another poem for *Spring* back in November 2004.

from the *Providence Notebook* [Summer, 2005]

John Tagliabue

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I never want my poems to be a cause or subject for school arguments, and certainly not arguments with friends.

I write and I write and that's that. And the consequences and the business related to that I *don't* know about. May the poems make *many* editors and readers often inspired and helped and merry. And that's that. The poem controls me, and I somewhat control it in the act of writing. I'm thankful. As Falstaff said - "Instinct is a great matter." And fame?? *some* of my poems in ways said some things inspired about that.

Among many others I've enjoyed, learned from, the poems of E. E. Cummings, Rimbaud, Apollinaire. Re-read Cummings' *6 nonlectures*. Form, shape, in art and poetry are part of "meaning" and entertainment; those poets and I *don't* want the *shape* of our poems *changed*. *Much* could be discussed concerning all this and that could sometimes be interesting. But *I prefer* to walk, dance, write poems rather than have Critical Discussions. So ? On with the show. And may you be entertained and happy.

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I'm not saying it's a bad pastime Showing Appreciation, even

stylizing that; I did plenty of that from 1945 to '89 in classes. That at times was entertaining.

You've come to terms with a big book, you've sort of wrestled with an angel now by age 82 you've turned a million pages, more, you've been emotional at different stages, some rage against the dying of the light, some zen laugh all along at what you call right and wrong. A friend has a vast philosophic sense of history until he begins to forget names of friends, names of uncles and epochs. Everything we knew grows old but everything we know is new. Some days you like it; some days you don't and say so what ? Home is everywhere for Puck and Lear and charity begins at home; seeking improvements you sometimes come to plateaus of platitudes. Sighing or laughing you approve of loving others and go to bed. Old or young you persist in repeating, at least in hoping, home is a place for love. You'll even go as far as Dante, agree with him — "love moves the sun and other stars."

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EMERSON: "As I am, so I see, use what language we will, we can never say anything but what we are."

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With instincts for realisms and hope

I hope I come / I hope you come / not when irritable or confused / but when generously good and ready and welcoming / each other lightly casually surprisingly very appreciatively / with freshness very good and ready.

+

Advice to myself. If you forget your zen /
then don't forget / your taoism.

Robert Farnsworth's Reading of a Tagliabue Poem

At the September 2006 faculty meeting, English faculty member Rob Farnsworth, who spent the summer as the poet-in-residence at The Frost Place, a museum and arts center housed in poet Robert Frost's former homestead in Franconia, N.H., read a poem of his own in memory of John Tagliabue as well as this poem of Tagliabue's, "Sliding into the Future":
Source: <http://www.bates.edu/x149922.xml>

Sliding Into the Future

Achieving?

What is there to achieve? The event occurs at its
own accord

as the sea shell is made or the volcano erupts
or the lines

of a Shakespeare play are memorized; in due time

It Happens

momentously temporarily, the snow cap melts,

the sea anemone

blossoms, the lizard's shadow is sketched in the
memory.

The anguish in the sick bed is engraved on
the foam.

Forms keep changing; clouds as much as deities;
and Zeus

is bewildered, transformed. The opulent is found
or lost in

the twinkling of an eye. Someone performs a
ritual in shadows.

The lover leaves his bed; none knows what will
happen next.

Achievements flare up like the flames of orange moths
on Paros.

Faces keep appearing from the distant past. Boats appear
with cargoes never seen before.

— John Tagliabue

Let us remember

John Tagliabue 1923-2006

The look and book of truth can never be unfaithful

Now it's not the first time that

I see angels
I mean snowflakes
or that I hear music
born out of what seems
silence but it is the
most necessary (is that
easy?) fact in the
fabulous world of
changing events that
renewal is the law
of Providence,

It occurs in strange and at times difficult and painful

ways, death, loss of
faith; but as I see
all these minute
snowflakes in the grey
Maine day which I

cannot count any more than St. Thomas could the
angels on a pin's head

I am conscious of a quiet newness that I
declare a cool and refreshing
in some ways undecipherable
new testament.

—*Providence, RI*