

Memorial Minute for Daniel Aaron
Read by Dean Flower at the November 16, 2016 Faculty Meeting

Daniel Aaron came to Smith College in the fall of 1939 as an Instructor in the English Department, at a salary of \$2,250 per year, drawn by the presence of Newton Arvin whose literary scholarship he admired. He had been a graduate student at Harvard, studying with F. O. Matthiessen, Perry Miller, and Howard Mumford Jones, preparing for a Ph. D. in its new American Civilization Program, and a teaching a few classes in the English Department. But he had no degree apart from an A.B. from the University of Michigan, and he would spend the next four years writing his dissertation while teaching full-time, in a department of ten men and fifteen women. At the end of his first meeting with the staff of English 11, Freshman Composition, the chair Mary Ellen Chase, said brightly, “Well girls, let’s all go have a Coke!” I heard him tell that story more than once, when I came to know him in the early 1970s.

Dan’s dissertation, *Cincinnati, 1818-1838: A Study of Attitudes in the Urban West*, required two summers of research in the libraries and archives of Cincinnati—he called them “tropical ordeals”—and it wasn’t finished until 1942. His committee didn’t want any revisions at all, and never expressed any enthusiasm for it, but it earned him promotion to Assistant Professor, and its scholarship was so scrupulous that it came to be one of Harvard’s most frequently requested interlibrary-loan titles. It was even published fifty years after its completion, under a new title, *Cincinnati, Queen City of the West*, in 1992, and is still said to be valuable for researchers in urban history today. But it wasn’t history he taught. In 1942 Dan began teaching English 331a: “Transcendentalism and Nationalism in American Literature” (Newton Arvin’s domain) and 331b: “American Fiction from 1830 to 1900,”—chiefly Hawthorne, Poe, Melville, Howells and James. His next book, or rather his first, came out of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1947-48, and displayed his unique blend of historical and political interests—he called himself “an irregular in the ranks of the non-Communist left”—combined with an acute understanding of literature’s power. It was called *Men of Good Hope: A Story of American Progressives* (1951) and included chapters

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on Emerson, Edward Bellamy, Howells, Thorstein Veblen, and Theodore Roosevelt. For the rigor of its focus on our idealistic intellectual history and the equal vigor of its style, the book offered firm resistance to the virus of McCarthyism then spreading into our national life. I particularly relish passages like the following, where Dan describes Thorstein Veblen as an “owlish, indecorous troglodyte . . . long-legged and spare like the frontier rascals of The Tall Tales . . . [who] quite consciously encouraged the legend of his remoteness and intellectual orphanhood, scoffing at the humanitarians who tried to change petrified institutions and shunning moral exhortation.”

Dan too was an orphan. Born Daniel Baruch Aaron on August 4, 1912 in Chicago to Russian Jewish parents, he grew up in Los Angeles after his father, an affluent lawyer, was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis in 1915 and the warm climate of Southern California became attractive. His mother, also ill, died first, and then his father in 1924, so the five children moved back to Chicago to be superintended by a bachelor uncle. From then on Daniel felt little attachment to any home, although he spoke to me more than once of the Edenic beauties of Los Angeles. In his autobiography, *The Americanist* (2007), he recalls “rose bushes and Japanese gardeners, fruit trees (orange, lemon, peach); a waxy white avocado blossom; dead-ripe figs picked early in the morning . . .; [and] an enormous toad nudging a calla lily.” There was also “a big car and a chauffeur to go with it; [plus] maids, nurses, male and female” in what he called “a never-to-be-duplicated style of living.”

Even when at home in Northampton on Washington Avenue (later at 58 Paradise Road) or ensconced in his Neilson Library grotto, Daniel never stayed home for long. He lectured at the Salzburg Seminar on American Studies in the summer of 1949, spent a semester at Bennington in 1950, then a year in Finland at the University of Helsinki in 1951-52 (with his wife Janet and their three boys, Jonathan, James, and Paul); then he taught at Amherst College in 1954-55, did research in the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford in 1958-59; was a visiting

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professor at Yale in 1959-60; lectured in Italy and Ireland for the US Information Agency, and in Frankfurt and Tübingen for the U.S. Foreign Service in 1963. Later that year he gave a lecture series in Warsaw, an experience he drew upon for his Katherine Asher Engle lecture at Smith, titled “Poland: A Self-Interview.” In 1966 he lectured in Montevideo at the University of the Republic. In 1967 he taught at the University of Sussex in Great Britain, and lectured on “The Function of the Intellectual in American Society” in Caracas, Venezuela. He learned, among other things, that if he wanted to play tennis in these remote locations, he needed to bring only his own tennis shoes—he could always borrow the rest.

Daniel’s most influential book, *Writers on the Left: Episodes in American Literary Communism*, came out in 1961. Irving Howe called it “Admirable, indispensable, a testimonial to what is best in American liberal scholarship.” Its acknowledgements page reads like a who’s who of American writers and critics, and attests to a remarkable ability to make friends of all kinds—especially writers, intellectuals, and critics--irascible people who disagree on principle with everyone. He befriended not only his elders and teachers and editors but also his juniors—ambitious younger scholars, eager students, entire English Departments across the country and abroad, librarians everywhere he did research, even the audiences whose languages he didn’t speak. He was unfailingly affable and kind, and he remembered you even after years of not hearing your name.

Dan collaborated with Richard Hofstadter, Richard Miller, and others in writing several textbooks of American history, including *The United States: The History of the Republic* (1957), and after Newton Arvin’s retirement in 1961 he created single-handedly Smith’s American Studies Program, and taught its essential “Integrating course.” Long an admirer and friend of Edmund Wilson, Dan wrote for many of the same journals: *The Partisan Review*, *The New Leader*, *Commonweal*, *The Reporter*, *The New Republic*, *The Saturday Review of Literature*, and *The New*

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York Review of Books, among others. Wilson's study of American Civil War literature, *Patriotic Gore* (1962) prompted Dan's next book, *The Unwritten War*, published in 1973 but written almost entirely at Smith. It was Dan's most literary book, and many of us in the English and History departments saw drafts of its chapters. I remember particularly admiring its concluding section, five chapters on William Faulkner's responses to racism, slavery, and the war. Dan carried the theme much farther than Wilson had dared, and his writing was at its most vigorous and deeply felt. No wonder it was a finalist for the National Book Award.

Having resisted offers from big universities for 32 years, Daniel yielded at last to Harvard's invitation in 1971, to direct its graduate program in American Civilization, and there he continued teaching for another 13 years. He returned to Smith in 1974 to lecture on "The Writer as Hero: Edmund Wilson." As his literary executor, Dan helped to carry out Wilson's dream of an American version of France's Pléiade editions, our national literature compactly printed on India paper with well-sewn bindings. With Richard Poirier as co-founder of the project, and seed-money from the Ford Foundation, *The Library of America* began publication in 1979, and was an instant success. Its current director, Cheryl Hurley, said recently, "Dan was a great force. When you're a startup you have to get people to work with you. Dan was our secret weapon. He knew everyone in the academy."

Dan kept on working, indefatigably, long after his retirement in 1983, even using a wheelchair to get to his office when he could no longer bicycle or walk. He die

d a few months short of his 104th birthday, on May 3, 2016. Among his innumerable honors was an Honorary Doctorate of Letters from Harvard in 2007, and a National Humanities Medal awarded by President Obama in 2010. But not all of the honor should be claimed in Cambridge or in Washington, D.C. Let it not be forgotten that most of Daniel Aaron's exemplary career—and all of his most important books—were brought to fruition here, at Smith College.