

# A TRIBUTE TO JUDITH ROBINSON-VALÉRY

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The year 2003 marked the fortieth anniversary of the appointment of Judith Robinson-Valéry as Foundation Professor of French and Head of the School of Western European Languages at the University of New South Wales. In both commemoration and celebration of this significant event in Australian French Studies, I delivered a tribute to Judith Robinson-Valéry at a seminar organized by Dr Maurice Blackman at the University of New South Wales in September of that year. It was a joyous occasion. Judith, her son Anthony and other members of her family, a number of former colleagues, past students and friends were present. This tribute reproduces, in substantial form, my address. It is essentially a *personal* tribute, the fruit of a long and close relationship with Judith that spans over thirty years: Judith taught me as an undergraduate at the University of New South Wales, supervising my Honours thesis on a corpus of Paul Valéry's (then) unpublished prose poems; I continued working on Valéry's poetry for my *maîtrise*, Judith arranging my supervision in Paris by a leading Valéry specialist, Jean Levaillant; she subsequently supervised my *doctorat* on the poetry of Yves Bonnefoy. We were, until recently, collaborating on a research project studying the significance of the Mediterranean crucible in Valéry's thought.

Born Judith Ogilvie White in Canberra in 1933, she was the daughter of Sir Harold White, founder of the National Library. Canberra in the post-war era had very much a village atmosphere: her mother, Elizabeth, kept a cow in her garden to ensure the children enjoyed fresh milk! Judith as an adolescent relished both the closeness of this community and its cosmopolitan pretensions. The Whites were prominent in Canberra society; senior public servants and foreign diplomats were frequent visitors to their house in Mugga Way, Red Hill. Her intellectual brilliance set Judith apart at an early age, and she matriculated aged fifteen from Canberra High School. Her undergraduate studies at the University of Sydney were exceptionally distinguished, in both English literature and French, and she was awarded all possible prizes for academic achievement. She was also, as told to me by Ross Chambers, well-known as a talented actor, appearing in student productions of Molière's *Le Misanthrope* and Giraudoux's *La Guerre de Troie n'aura pas lieu*, and she possessed a real gift for conversation, worthy of any eighteenth-century *salonnière*. A University Medallist in French (1954), Judith undertook research for her doctorate at the Sorbonne (the University of Paris), and in later years would regale her students with

stories of Paris in the fifties, of life under the Fourth Republic, and the impact of the Algerian crisis. She completed her doctoral thesis on the writer and moralist Alain in 1957, published by José Corti the following year as *Alain, lecteur de Stendhal et de Balzac*. This was the first of some sixty scholarly books and articles she would write over the following four decades. After a year's teaching at various Cambridge colleges, Judith was elected in 1958 to a Research Fellowship at Girton College, Cambridge, and remained there until her appointment to the Chair of French at the University of New South Wales. During these years in Cambridge she began her research on one of France's most important twentieth-century writers and thinkers, Paul Valéry (1871–1945), publishing a number of articles on his *Cahiers* that shed new light on his thought, and focusing particularly on his lifelong preoccupation with the processes and mechanisms of human consciousness. Judith's international standing in Valéry studies was firmly established with the publication in 1963 by José Corti of *L'Analyse de l'esprit dans les Cahiers de Valéry*. The high praise she received for this truly landmark publication led to the invitation by the publishing house Gallimard, the Valéry family and the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique to bring out an annotated two-volume edition of Valéry's *Cahiers* in the prestigious Pléiade collection. This was a tremendous distinction for a young Australian scholar and represented an undertaking of very considerable proportions. Claude Valéry, the elder son of Paul Valéry, whom Judith married in 1976, told me that the family would speak of "*le miracle Robinson*", such were the complexities and difficulties successfully overcome by Judith in the realization of this project. The two volumes appeared in 1972 and 1974 to universal acclaim; there have been several subsequent French editions; and they have been published, in translation, in editions in many languages: German, English, Italian, Japanese, Rumanian, Russian, Hungarian, Bulgarian and Serbo-Croatian.

In 1974, after eleven years at the University of New South Wales—during which time programmes in German, Russian and Spanish were introduced—Judith resigned from her Professorship, returned to France, and took up residence in Paris in 1975. She held several Visiting Professorships in French universities (Paris X–Nanterre, Paris IV–La Sorbonne, Paul Valéry–Montpellier III) before her appointment in 1982 as a *Directeur* of research at the Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique (CNRS) in Paris. Pursuing her research on Valéry over a further twenty years, her many publications and scholarly activities across Europe, in Japan and South America brought her recognition as the *doyenne* of Valéry studies, and she

was awarded numerous honours and distinctions. The two which hold the most significance for Judith were the conferring, in 1987, of a Doctor of Letters *honoris causa* by the University of New South Wales, and her appointment, the same year, to the French Conseil National pour la Recherche Scientifique. Having retired in 1998 from her position at the CNRS, Judith continued to live in Paris, in her famously elegant apartment in the avenue Hoche, until late 2001 when, owing to failing health, she returned to Sydney.

Judith's taking up the appointment as Foundation Professor of French at the University of New South Wales in 1963 marked a turning point in French Studies in that state, if not Australia. Firstly, at thirty, she was one of the youngest "full professors" ever appointed in this country and, as Head of a university department, the School of Western European Languages, she was the first woman Professor to occupy such a position here. At the time of my writing this tribute, the Chairs of French at both the University of Melbourne and the University of Sydney are held by women: Anne Freadman and Margaret Sankey respectively. Forty years ago, the appointment of a young woman as Professor and Head of Languages caused a stir in the Sydney press. The *Sydney Morning Herald* captioned its article reporting the event "Languages Professor a Woman" (20 February 1963) and highlighted the incoming Professor's conviction "that it was necessary to produce more vivid methods of teaching French at university level". Nothing too remarkable about that, perhaps, other than underscoring the gender of the appointee. However, when in December of 1964 Judith was the invited speaker at the Fort Street Girls' High School Speech Day at the Conservatorium, her speech provoked something of a sensation. She spoke of woman's place in Australian society and lamented, "Too few Australian women want to get out of their homes and develop their minds" (as reported in the *Sun*, 17 December 1964). Furthermore, she urged the students present to pursue their education as far as possible and to make the most of the career opportunities open to them. In following days, all the major Sydney dailies published feature articles on this new "Languages Professor": a young, attractive woman! There was also a stream of letters to the editor, continuing for well over a month, whose writers took sides for or against Judith's supposed broadside at the failure of some Australian women to achieve their potential outside the domestic sphere. Unfortunately, the original text of this speech is unlocatable; however, Judith, never one to hide her light under a bushel, quite relished the controversy and assiduously put many of these press items aside, together with a number of cartoons

published during these weeks of public debate. The press clippings are most telling about prevailing attitudes towards Australian women in professional life at the time. The *Sydney Morning Herald*, in a lengthy feature article headed "A Woman's Place Is Not Just In The Home", very much endorsed Judith's point of view, but nevertheless did not refrain from commenting on her physical attributes and described her as a "slim, lithe, good-looking woman". The article in the *Sun* (17 December 1964) was entitled "The Professor is a brunette" and stated: "Professor Robinson speaks with authority, conviction, daring and a dash of frilly feminine charm about what Australian Women should be doing. [. . .] **And there can be no doubt about her feminine charm. She is a pretty brunette who quashes once and for all the theory that brains and beauty are not found together**". The bold type occurs in the original. Further comment, I believe, is superfluous!

Among the Letters to the Editor, that of the Fort Street Girls' High School Principal, Miss A. Hamilton, is perhaps the most significant and supportive: "Professor Judith Robinson [. . .] gave an address which will not be easily forgotten. It was a real contribution to the education of the girls—indeed, of all those who were present. My years of teaching secondary school children have convinced me that Professor Robinson is correct in her contention that there is no truth in the theory that women are intellectually inferior to men. Further, I agree that women are partly responsible for the widespread acceptance of this theory in Australia." (*Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 December 1964)

Secondly, Judith saw her appointment to the Chair of French as an opportunity to inaugurate, in collaboration with her colleagues, a new direction in the teaching, at university level, of French language, literature and civilization. Much has been said of the Sydney University "Henning tradition" and many will have read K. R. Dutton's recent biography of Professor Ian Henning (Boombana Publications, 2002), under whom Judith herself had studied. That this tradition entailed a somewhat static curriculum, in which the study of phonetics and prose translation was central to language learning, as were translation and literary history in the literature courses, has been acknowledged by a number of my colleagues familiar with this regime. Judith's conception of the teaching of French represented a conscious break with tradition. This ideological shift was fully supported by those whom she appointed to her staff in the 1960s, notably Ross Chambers (1965) and Ross Steele (1968), both also graduates of the University of Sydney. The key to this new approach to the teaching of French was that in

all courses the target language was to be a *means of communication*, both on the level of social interaction and in intellectual discovery and discussion. Judith's own research and investigation into innovation in language teaching led her to make a very significant appointment in the person of Ross Steele as co-ordinator of language instruction. Ross had been the first Australian *lecteur d'anglais* at the Sorbonne and had specialized in language teaching methodology. Judith gave him the specific brief of introducing audio-visual teaching methods; courses were therefore devised around the use of the language laboratory *and* a multi-media room, a truly innovative initiative. It was Judith's personal decision to house the language laboratory in the main European Languages building (Morven Brown), with Ross Steele as Director. The use of tapes and recordings was naturally a feature of these new language courses, but so too was the use of "authentic material", including interviews, newspapers and advertisements, the latter considered most daring for the time! The study of translation was not abandoned, but was restricted to the third and fourth year language curriculum, taking the form of stylistic comparison, grounded in theory; honours language students were introduced to lexicography and Saussurian linguistics.

Judith and Ross Steele also collaborated closely on the introduction of a civilization component into the core undergraduate curriculum. Judith herself had very pronounced views, not just on the aesthetic qualities of iconic French cultural achievements, but also on the major contributions France had made in all fields of human endeavour. Furthermore, she expected graduates in French to have a firm grasp of France's place in the modern world, and to be familiar with "*le paysage français*" in the fullest sense of the term and in all its diversity. Her book, co-authored with Angus Martin, *France Today*, first published in 1964, reflects this intellectual and pedagogical commitment. By the early 1970s, first, second and third year courses included a compulsory civilization component of lectures and tutorials that covered many topics, from "*la monarchie absolue et le classicisme*" to "*le miracle économique français de l'après-guerre*" and "*les événements de mai '68*". For the civilization tutorials much use was also made of the multi-media Stereo Room, whose furnishings and decoration Judith, after consultation with Marion Hall Best, had chosen herself: fabrics and drapes in bold colours and reproductions of the seventeenth-century painter Georges de La Tour. Another important initiative was the inclusion of a civilization component in third year, termed "integration", which sought to place the texts and authors studied in the broader socio-historical and intellectual context. Various "options" were offered to all students, pass and

honours, such as that on French art taught by Ross Steele, and a string of guest lecturers was brought in: Roger Covell, for example, who lectured on the French musical tradition.

As for the teaching of French literature, Judith conceived this very much in terms of presenting students with an intellectual challenge and eliciting thus a personal *engagement* with the realm of ideas and their complexities. She sought to achieve a balance between the use of the target language as a practical tool for reading and understanding texts, and their study as a pathway to *critical thinking*, critical analysis and *mature intellectual reflection* on the ideas that, for example, Stendhal, La Rochefoucauld or Voltaire developed in their writings. Literature courses covered a very broad range of authors, periods, and genres; the honours curriculum, which in those days began the second year of study, included the Renaissance, the Baroque and the most recent developments in the novel and critical theory. Students acknowledged Judith as an incredibly inspiring teacher and for this reason she attracted many students into the honours stream, the highpoint of which, we all agreed, was her seminars on Stendhal.

The most significant early appointment Judith made in the field of literary studies was undoubtedly Ross Chambers, whose potential she recognized and resolutely fostered, encouraging his research and teaching interests in contemporary French theatre, Romanticism, Samuel Beckett and, of course, critical theory. In homage to Judith he says: "She had a *very distinguished career*. Judith was a truly unique person who concentrated very heavily on her teaching, heavily on her students, but *also* on her research, managing not only to pioneer a new Department—and remember she introduced German, Spanish and Russian—but to carve out an international career in research". In speaking to me about their time as colleagues at the University of New South Wales, Ross Chambers saw Judith as a pioneer in two respects: in the first place her conviction that French at the tertiary level should not be taught in isolation, but rather that it should involve teachers and students in a broader intellectual discourse across the Humanities—an approach which we today would call "area studies"; secondly, in her conception of the breadth of curriculum a French Department should offer its students: her model was very much that of "French Studies" as it is seen in virtually all university French programmes these days. The principles which informed her conception and concrete realization of the curriculum at the University of New South Wales would be further endorsed by Ross Chambers, who, subsequent to his appointment to the Chair of French at Sydney in 1971, "established a curriculum model which was in

many respects the realization of the model that had been developed at New South Wales". (Ross Steele)

In her role as Professor, Judith was inclusive and supportive in dealings with her teaching staff, not authoritarian or dictatorial. She could rely on the collaboration of her colleagues, all of whom felt they were involved in the development of a new approach to teaching in language, literature and civilization. Ross McKenna, appointed by Judith in 1968, communicated to me the following eloquent statement: "As Head of Department what was striking about Judith? Integrity, intellectual passion, and great fairness and consideration in her treatment of her staff; a way of leading which encouraged a hundred flowers to bloom; concern for her students. The result was a very exciting Department." These sentiments were echoed by other former colleagues Judith appointed in that era such as Andy Eyre (1969) and Michael Freyne (1972).

Judith never described herself as a feminist, stating in an interview given to the *Canberra Times*: "I have no aggressive anti-male stance. I am not and have never been what you would call a feminist and have always avoided being involved in that type of movement because I feel that its emotional level is too intense for clear rational thinking." (11 October 1987) However, she did have a profound sense of commitment to promoting women's education and their career potential. Judith's own career choices were in themselves a role model for other women, but alternative models were to be seen in those women she chose for positions in her Department. To return to her Speech Day address at Fort Street Girls' High School, she had urged all the women present to look at the "full curve" of their lives. Specifically, she outlined three phases in a woman's life, the third starting "about the age of forty when her lessening family responsibilities leave her free to take up her career again full-time" (as reported in the *Sun*, 16 December 1964). It is in this context that I would like to make special mention of two outstanding women whom Judith appointed to her staff in 1969: Sonia Marks (died 1985) and Véra Sauran (died 2000).

Sonia Marks had been in the same year as Judith as an undergraduate at the University of Sydney, had married and raised a family, giving up, it seemed, the prospect of career fulfilment. (We should recall that in those days a woman who married would automatically have to resign from the State teaching or public service). Sonia came to see Judith, wanting to explore the possibility of returning to her studies. "She became a real symbol for Judith, who was thrilled to see that Sonia, a woman so bright,

so intelligent, had decided to return to the world of ideas. It was Judith who gave Sonia the 'big break' to re-launch her career". (Ross Steele)

Véra Sauran was an unorthodox appointment in French Studies at that time as her academic background was neither in literature nor language pedagogy but in political science and sociology. She was a graduate of the Institut des Sciences Politiques ("Sciences Po") in Paris and Judith had co-supervised her PhD in sociology at the University of New South Wales. It is to Judith's credit that she made such a bold appointment and demonstrated once again her commitment to introducing different critical and intellectual perspectives into the French curriculum. In my own final honours year, for example, Véra Sauran taught a course on the development of French socialism.

For those of us who were privileged to be her students, Judith made the greatest of impressions and I can say, without reservation, that we were simply *fascinated* by her. I have already spoken of her reputation as a teacher. Apart from the intellectual impact she made, she would very often make axiomatic statements that we remember to this day, on an extraordinary range of topics, such as the following comment on Australian society: "*Les Australiens ont peur des arbres: c'est qu'ils poussent!*" Then there was her carefully articulated personal style: quite unforgettable. My fellow honours student Leigh Purcell has caught "le style Robinson" perfectly in this communication to me: "Judith was not someone to be overlooked. In fact it was impossible not to notice her. Jet black hair that was always 'just so', framing her domed forehead, red lipstick and invariably dressed in red with black stockings and black patent shoes—a veritable power dresser long before the term had been coined. Not for her the cliché of the academic or intellectual too concerned with loftier matters to pay much attention to appearances. There was nothing clichéd about Judith at all. Without doubt she would have needed to create an impression in the male dominated world of the higher echelons of university life as she carved a niche for her beloved French Studies in what was then the somewhat philistine environment of the University of New South Wales. I also remember Judith as having a well-developed sense of humour and I can still hear her laugh and see her face lit up".

In submitting an essay or delivering an exposé students were acutely conscious of her uncompromising standards: Judith demanded intellectual rigour combined with absolute precision in the use of French and she would constantly point out that sloppy or careless expression was symptomatic of



a lack of rational, critical thinking: “*ce qui se conçoit bien s'énonce clairement*”. Her rapport with students went beyond the classroom for she gave warm, generous support to the student French Society, allowing this body, very much in the spirit of the recent “events of May '68”, a real input into discussions on assessment policies. Judith encouraged the French Society to stand for intellectual debate, and to be more than a “wine and cheese” club, and indeed, it became a locus and forum for discussion. In those days of the Vietnam war moratoria and protests against apartheid there was no want of opportunities for such debate.

For the sharpness and breadth of your vision, for the way you taught us to think and to read, for telling us, always, never to be content with second-hand lives, we say now to Judith, thank you, with much affection.

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4. My former Honours-year classmates Leigh Purcell, Lily Liu and Clare Downs have remained in close touch since student days. To them also I am very grateful for sharing with me, over many years, their recollections of Judith Robinson-Valéry.