

A CULTURAL MEDIATOR WHO TOOK INNOVATION FROM AUSTRALIA TO FRANCE

ROGER MAURICE ARMAND LAUFER
1928–2011

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Coming from Warsaw University, where I had graduated as Master of Arts in the Department of Romance Languages and was a Senior Tutor, I was in Paris on a French government scholarship late in 1962 when I answered an advertisement in *Le Monde*, offering a position of Senior Teaching Fellow in the Department of Modern Languages at Monash University in Melbourne. Being on a very tight budget with a wife and a daughter, I sent my application by ordinary mail. Two months later I received an enthusiastic reply from Professor Roger Laufer, offering me the advertised position and requesting an answer by air mail. Thus started my relationship with the man to whom I owe my academic career.

Roger Laufer was born in Paris, the son of a dentist. He studied at the Lycée Carnot and then the Lycée Henri IV, where he was admitted to the special class known as *khâgne*, leading to admission to the École Normale Supérieure in Paris, the most prestigious tertiary institution in the humanities in France. After one year at the ENS, he became *licencié ès lettres* in both Classical Literature and English. Having completed a further year of advanced study he successfully sat the *Agrégation*, the highly demanding competitive examination required of all candidates for senior teaching positions in France. He was now an *agrégé d'anglais*, and in 1949–1950 he held the position of Assistant at the University of Liverpool in England. This was followed in 1950–1951 by a year in the United States with a postgraduate fellowship at

Yale, where he wrote a dissertation on the American New Critics, in order to fulfil the prerequisite for the French *Diplôme d'études supérieures*.

In 1952, he married Svanhild Hansen, from Norway. A son, Eric, was born in 1953. In 1954, he obtained the position of *lecteur* (Language Assistant) at the University of Sydney. Wallace Kirsop, who himself became in 1955 a Teaching Fellow in the Sydney Department headed by Professor Ian Henning, mentions the heavy teaching load the four members of the Department were sharing. In addition, Roger Laufer was actively involved in the work of the Alliance Française of Sydney and was also responsible for the ABC's French for Schools programme. In 1956, his last year in Sydney, he was promoted to a Lectureship. Three daughters, Yseult, Vivienne and Maryse, were born respectively in 1956, 1957 and 1961.

Roger Laufer left Sydney in 1957 for a Senior Lectureship in Professor Ron Jackson's Department of French at the University of Melbourne. Monash University, established in 1958, with the first students arriving in early 1961, included right from the beginning a Department of Modern Languages. At the end of 1961, Roger Laufer was appointed to the Foundation Chair of French and became head of the Department, which started with French, German, Indonesian and Malay, Linguistics and Russian.

His specialisation in eighteenth century French Literature was illustrated by the publication of two outstanding books of literary history and criticism, *Style Rococo, style des « Lumières »* (José Corti, 1963) and his thesis for the *Doctorat d'État*, published under the title *Lesage ou le métier de romancier* (Gallimard, 1971).

By that time his transfer from English studies to French literature was complete. Wallace Kirsop, who was one of the first appointees in the Department during the Laufer years, introduced him to physical bibliography, linked with the genetic analysis of texts, disciplines widely known in the English-speaking world, but not in France. Roger Laufer promptly saw the potential of this approach, especially for the study of pre-nineteenth century texts, and grew into a pioneering scholar in this area. The long methodological introduction to his critical edition of Lesage's *Le Diable boiteux* (Mouton, 1970) could be seen as linking the two fields, eighteenth century literature and physical bibliography. With the publication of his *Introduction à la textologie : vérification, établissement, édition des textes* (Larousse, 1972) Roger Laufer became the undisputed leader in this field in France.

On our arrival by sea from Genoa, Roger Laufer collected us from the wharf and took us to his house in North Balwyn. On that first day of our new life in Australia, Roger and I had a very long conversation. His enthusiasm for the French Communist Party, which, according to Wallace Kirsop, was still evident in Sydney in 1955, explains why he had a lot to share with the young Communist I had been after World War II in my native Belgium, although, due to my experience of life in Poland and the events of 1956, by the early 'sixties I was radically cured of Communism.

The main topic, however, of our discussion was my interest in the early twentieth century Socialist and mystical poet Charles Péguy, on whom I was preparing a French University doctoral thesis. Roger Laufer was highly supportive of the younger members of the Department and it is thanks to his support that I was able to complete and successfully defend my thesis at the University of Provence in France in 1965.

His French department at Monash was in many ways different from its counterparts in Australia's other universities. Apart from his less conventional appointment policy, he introduced courses with a strong theoretical content and interdisciplinary approaches which were not common in the early 'sixties, cooperating not only with colleagues in the various language disciplines but also with those in other departments such as History. In the area of postgraduate studies the Monash French Department was the first to offer research training in the form of a Master of Arts by course work and a minor thesis, but arguably one of Roger Laufer's most lasting achievement in Australia was the founding in 1964 of the *Australian Journal of French Studies*.

Roger Laufer left Australia with his family in 1967, to re-start his academic career in his native France. The French government marked its appreciation of his contribution to French studies in Australia by the award of the *Palmes académiques* (September 1967).

First appointed to the University of Provence as a *maître de conférences*, in 1970 Roger Laufer became Professor of French Literature at the University of Paris VIII (Vincennes), one of the innovative universities on the post-1968 French university scene. Paris VIII later moved to Saint-Denis, and Roger Laufer's chair was re-named *Sciences de l'information*. This reflects the shift in his interests from eighteenth century French literature to physical bibliography, the history of the book, the study of texts and information technology as it affects our reading of texts. His investigations extended to contemporary

developments, and in particular to the implications for textual transmission of reading on screen. Most of his later production (he was the author or co-author of over twenty books) was devoted to this second strand in his interests, which originated during his Monash years.

Roger Laufer returned to Australia with his wife Svanhild a last time in 1993, the year he retired, to celebrate the thirtieth anniversary of the *Australian Journal of French Studies*, the journal he had founded. His vision proved a sound foundation for the achievements of his successors as *AJFS* has prospered and remains today a leading journal in the field.

Roger Laufer died on 19 December 2011. Many former and present Monash colleagues will be aware of how much his presence can still be felt in our library collections and in many fields of research, from literary history to physical bibliography, to which he made such outstanding contributions.

Monash University