

Ross Chambers (1932–2017)

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Ross Chambers, Distinguished Marvin Felheim Professor of French and Comparative Literature Emeritus at the University of Michigan, died at the age of 84 on 18 October 2017 in Ann Arbor, Michigan, after a brief illness. He was an inspired educator, working in the areas of French Studies, Comparative Literature and Cultural Studies. Over a period of thirty-five years Ross was the author of nine books, the last of which was published in 2004.

Born and educated in Australia, Ross began his career as an academic in this country in 1957 and was employed in several universities here until he was appointed to the University of Michigan in 1975. He had not lived in Australia since his Michigan appointment but the strong links that he had forged here with colleagues and former students, as well as the groundbreaking works he continued to publish, made him a continuing presence amongst us.

Ross was born in Kempsey, NSW, Australia, on 19 November 1932. He began his university studies at the New England University College (affiliated with the University of Sydney) in 1949, gaining 1st class honours in French in 1952 at the University of Sydney. After his honours year, he enrolled in a Diploma of Education course, but interrupted his studies to take up a two-year teaching position as *Assistant d'anglais* at the *Collège Moderne Technique*¹ in Reims. While in Reims he honed his linguistic skills and immersed himself in French intellectual life.

¹ Eds: Sometimes written as *Collège Moderne et Technique*, it is where German officers signed an Instrument of Surrender on 7 May 1945, ending the Second World War.

He returned to Australia in 1955 to complete his Diploma of Education. After teaching French and German briefly at Sydney Boys' High School, Ross was appointed in 1957 to a Lectureship at the University of Queensland, before returning to the University of Sydney as a Lecturer in 1959. In the same year he was awarded an MA with 1st class honours for his thesis on *L'importance de l'anglicisme dans le français contemporain*. On one of his frequent visits to France around this time he became a member of the experimental literary group, *OULIPO* (*Ouvroir de littérature potentielle*), founded by Raymond Queneau and François Le Lionnais.

My first meeting with Ross was in 1962 when, in my third undergraduate year of an Arts Degree he lectured on the writings of Gerard de Nerval. In my study of French, English and German literature up to that point I had mainly encountered teaching in the traditional history of literature mould, where lectures were centred on the author's biography and his or her place in the literary tradition. This I had found absorbing, but I was ready to broaden my horizons.

In the Nerval lectures, Ross's approach to the study of literature was new and exciting. He explored with us the nature of literature and writing, focussing on the thematic intricacies of the text, rather than on exploring the historical context and the author's life. He gave us our first taste of 'continental' philosophy, introducing us to the work of the Gaston Bachelard, whose theories on the nature of the imaginary he used to illuminate aspects of Nerval's texts. In 1964, Ross left the University of Sydney to take up an appointment as Senior Lecturer at the University of New South Wales, under Professor Judith Robinson.

In 1967 Ross was awarded a Doctorat d'Université from the University of Grenoble for his thesis on Nerval, supervised by the eminent scholar of Romanticism, Professor Léon Cellier. His first book, *Gérard de Nerval et la poétique du voyage*, was published by the prestigious French publisher, José Corti, two years later.

In 1972 Ross returned to the University of Sydney when he was appointed to the McCaughey Chair of French, succeeding Professor Ian Henning who had held the Chair since 1946. In his application Ross outlined his philosophy concerning the tertiary study of French, and reflected on the discipline:

I am extremely interested in the problem of the coherence of French Studies as a discipline ranging over a number of apparently diverse branches and with ‘openings’ onto fundamental studies in the humanities and social sciences, [...]

It is my firm belief that linguistics and history provide the two main methodological models on which modern language studies should be built.

Ross also attached to his application a short paper entitled the ‘Development of French Studies at the University of Sydney’ in which he set out how he would go about putting into practice his ideas, if appointed. The early 1970s was a time of expansion and renewal in Australian universities and Ross took advantage of the possibilities offered to remodel radically the department in accordance with his vision. By this time I was a Lecturer in the French department and thus had the privilege of participating in the restructuring and reorientation of teaching and research that Ross instituted. It was an exhilarating time, but also one of great upheaval as the old model gave way to the new. In the three short years that Ross was Professor he brought about many changes, transforming the department through curriculum reorganisation and his teaching innovations.

These were the times when literary theory and, in particular, ‘French theory’, dominated at the time by Structuralism, was beginning its sweep through the academic world. Ross emphasised the importance of a methodological underpinning to studies in French. For him, the aim of the teacher should be to inculcate ‘an awareness in all students of the methodological problems raised by their subject’. He advocated that ‘every student in French Studies should be led to reflect on such basic questions as: “what is language?” “what is culture?” “on what basis can one *interpret* a text, work of art, a historical document, or event?”’

To achieve his aims, Ross reorganised both the language and ‘content’ programmes of the department. He replaced the traditional history of literature model by a theoretical and thematic approach to literary studies and introduced as well a more broadly based programme, adding social sciences and linguistic strands, alongside the literature courses. He also established a beginners’ stream, in line with the other languages in the Faculty, recruiting appropriate specialised staff. In this course, students were introduced to writers such as Lévi-Strauss and Leiris. His rationale was that

students who had not studied French before entering university would not necessarily want to focus on the minutiae of literary study, but would profit, rather, from a more general study of French intellectual culture and ideas. To reflect the new directions in which Ross was taking the discipline, this expanded focus led eventually to the change in the department's name from 'French' to 'French Studies'.

Ross also set about raising the profile of the department. He encouraged the development of a research-oriented culture, where previously the main focus had been on teaching. He acted as guide and mentor to both students and staff, highlighting the necessary nexus between research and teaching. Postgraduate enrolments increased dramatically and research seminars became a regular feature of the life of the department. Central to Ross's vision for the French department was the importance of linguistics: the theoretical as well as practical study of language. To understand how language functioned we read Saussure, Benveniste, Greimas, Barthes, Jakobson, Genette, as well as Derrida.

While at the University of Sydney, Ross accomplished much, setting the department on a new path, on which it continued and developed under the able leadership of Ivan Barko, the following McCaughey Professor.

The first eighteen years of Ross's career were spent in Australian universities and during this time Ross established himself as an original and trail-blazing thinker, both as a pedagogue and as a researcher. His earliest research projects had been linguistic in nature. When he began his academic career, his interest turned to the study of nineteenth- and twentieth-century French literature, with a particular focus on theatre and poetry. Thus, he published on Beckett and Artaud and began work on Nerval. His first three books: *Gérard de Nerval et la poétique du voyage* (José Corti 1969, Paris); *La Comédie au château: contribution à la poétique du théâtre* (José Corti 1971, Paris) and *Spirite de Théophile Gautier : une lecture* (Lettres modernes 1974, Paris) were written during this period.

Ross's move to the University of Michigan in 1975 signalled the continuing deepening and widening of his interest in cultural phenomena, in keeping with his vision of the role of the scholar in modern language disciplines. Refining his views on text and narrative, he was now going beyond the confines of 'French Studies' properly speaking and consequently began publishing mostly in English. His ground-breaking work on the nature of fiction,

Story and Situation: Narrative and Seduction and the Power of Fiction (University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis) was published in 1984.

In 1985, when he was appointed to the Marvin Felheim Distinguished University Professorship at the University of Michigan, he transferred half of his position to the Comparative Literature department, thus strengthening that discipline and at the same time bearing witness to the fact that French Studies (or the study of any other modern language subject), as he had envisioned, was a springboard for wider engagement with society. His subsequent writings as a reader of textuality embodied his continuing subtle analyses of the intersections of the worlds of words and social action, exploring how literary and other texts construct the world as they are constructed by it. His *Mélancolie et opposition : les débuts du modernisme en France* (José Corti 1987, Paris) was concerned with French literary production in the wake of the revolution of 1848; *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative* (University of Chicago Press 1991, Chicago) deals with the oppositional forces inherent in narrative itself; *Facing It: Aids Diaries and the Death of the Author* (University of Michigan Press 1998, Ann Arbor) examines the rhetorical specificities and ramifications of writing by AIDS sufferers; and *Loiterature*, (University of Nebraska Press 1999, Lincoln) demonstrates ‘digressive waywardness’ in literature as a form of cultural expression. In Ross’s final book, *Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting* (University of Michigan Press 2004, Ann Arbor) he focusses on the genre of testimonial writing, as exemplified in writing on AIDS, the First World War and the Holocaust, and explores how society can be haunted by its own history.

Ross was at the University of Michigan for forty-two years and the obituary by William Paulson in the Michigan *University Record* bears eloquent testimony to his contribution to that institution.²

Although he retired in 2002, he continued to be actively involved in many of his academic activities until shortly before his death when, returning to his interest in nineteenth-century poetry, he published what was to be his last article, ‘Atmospherics of the City: Baudelaire and the Poetics of Noise’ in 2015.

² <https://protect-au.mimecast.com/s/ZXg4BxUoqDVmiZ?domain=record.umich.edu>

Ross was a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and an Officier dans l'Ordre des Palmes académiques (France). His achievements as a scholar and teacher were recognized by many visiting appointments at leading universities; he received a Distinguished Faculty Achievement Award at the University of Michigan (1992) and an honorary doctorate from the Université de Neuchâtel, Switzerland (2001).

After his move in 1975 to the United States, Ross made many trips back to Australia. He was frequently invited to give keynote addresses at conferences and to conduct workshops in departments of French and Cultural Studies in Australian universities. He used these opportunities also to stay in touch with friends, family and colleagues. Ross is survived by a brother, Graeme Chambers of Rozelle, Australia, and several nieces and nephews.

Ross's most recent visit to Australia was in December 2012 when he was invited to the University of Sydney, both by the department of French Studies to give the Sonia Marks Memorial Lecture, and by the Department of Cultural Studies to give the keynote address at the annual conference of the Cultural Studies Association of Australasia. On this, his last visit, it was fitting that two of the disciplinary areas which claim him as their own should have had the opportunity to welcome him.

Ross was an important presence throughout my professional life, playing a significant role in shaping its direction from the time of my undergraduate studies. Throughout my career I could count on his unfailing support, as well as his help and guidance at crucial moments. He was a kind and generous man and over the years, and in many different countries, I have met numerous people who are similarly grateful to him.

With sadness, but with anticipation, I look forward to the publication of Ross's last book, an autobiography entitled *My Life as a Parrot*. The title promises more delightful pleasures: memories, ironies and paradoxes, and will certainly contain much food for thought.

The University of Sydney