



TUFTS UNIVERSITY

Office of the Secretary of the Faculties

RESOLUTION OF THE DEATH OF
FREDERIC J. SHEPLER
ADOPTED BY THE FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCE OF
TUFTS UNIVERSITY
March 26, 1984

The premature death of Frederic J. Shepler has deprived the Tufts campus of a highly esteemed professor of humanities, an authentic spokesman for the arts and a human being of rare patience and tolerance.

As a young man, Fred attended Lynn High School, graduating in 1958. A major award, the Augustus Howe Buck Scholarship, allowed him to study at Boston University, where he majored in French, was elected to Phi Beta Kappa in 1961 and graduated summa cum laude in June 1962. The following year he received his M.A. from Middlebury College, whose Paris program gave him the chance to reside and study for a year in that city which he came to understand and love deeply.

His doctoral studies were accomplished at Yale, in a distinguished department where he was able to work with some of the finest minds in his field. He received his Doctorate in 1968 after completion of an excellent dissertation on the poetry of Henri Michaux. A year previously, the Director of Graduate Studies had already described him as a "very fine human being, totally devoid of any arrogance or aggressivity, but who nevertheless has solid and thoroughly motivated convictions". Indeed, this ability to express firm convictions without arrogance, to make a point without ever diminishing his adversary, was a spontaneous feature of Fred's temperament one which allowed him to emerge at Tufts as a superb spokesman of reasoned discussion.

In 1968, he was invited by Professor Seymour Simches to join an expanding department of French. Immediately, his presence became central to the activities of that department

by virtue of his direct involvement in and oversight of the Paris program, his unflagging support of the French house, and especially the wide variety of courses which he taught and the truly exceptional enthusiasm he was able to generate in students at all levels. In survey courses in literature, he stimulated students towards further study and was responsible for establishing the structure under which that course still functions. In his course on the novel in the 19th century, he guided students in the reading of long and complex works of fiction. In his course on 20th century French poetry, which was his first love and specialty, he involved them in the explication of subtle, allusive, difficult poetic texts, constantly reminding them to ask themselves the central question of "what a poem can be." In the course on translation which he created, thereby introducing formal translation to the departmental curriculum, he and his students poured over texts of all kinds: prose fiction, poetry, newspaper articles, even advertisements. Furthermore, he directed, always with a deep personal commitment, numerous Masters and Doctoral theses, and was in this regard, too, an indispensable colleague.

Students therefore flocked to Fred's courses, all of them, whatever their subject, sure of finding in them a dynamic lecturer, a patient advisor and a real friend, a teacher whose judgements would always be tempered with sensitivity and humanity.

No surprise, then, that he was the first recipient, in 1974, of the Lillian Leibner Award for distinguished teaching and advising.

His career, brutally cut short, was nevertheless rich, varied and highly original. Few professors of humanities have lectured at the Medical School, as he did one year, on "Moments of Literary Truth at Meal-time" and, another year, on "Poetry, Medicine and other Unmentionable Things." Few have been willing, as he did on two separate occasions, to sacrifice the tranquility of the Winter Study Period in order to lead groups of students on tours to Paris and Southern France. In this regard, an anecdote is in order. I have never seen Fred drive an automobile. Even in the City of Boston, which was dear to him, he had no horror of busses, streetcars or subways: in winter or summer, he was

a public transportation commuter to the University. Now, in a memo to the Dean of Faculty written in June 1972, Fred reported in these terms on the student tour he had guided in January, having been left alone in charge of 26 students after the last-minute abstention of a colleague scheduled to accompany him: "There was a week in Southern France in a Mediterranean village. I drove the Volkswagen bus (...) and despite the one incident of the entire clutch and gear system giving out on the corniche between Nice and Villefranche (...), it was great." It is of course best if one is familiar with the corniche between Nice and Villefranche, but the point seems clear; for his students, he would drive a bus, despite his pronounced distrust of cars.

Also worthy of note, for a college professor, his basic dislike of the typewriter. He preferred what Mallarmé has called "the taste of holding a pen," the physical act of transcribing thoughts and feelings onto paper by means of older, simpler instruments. And the keyboard he clearly preferred was that of the grand piano to which he was so affectionately attached.

He was an authentic man of letters, reading, writing, commenting on poetry, not primarily for professional purposes, but rather for the pleasure of doing so. To be sure, he was a creative and productive scholar, the author of a beautifully written and subtly analytic study of Henri Michaux and many an article on modern literature and criticism. And when he fell ill, he was joyously at work on a book dealing with several contemporary French poets. But he went about the business of scholarship without even a hint of snobishness, with a refreshing lightness that is remarkable and unusual. He was wholly undogmatic, flexible, available to new ideas and modes of criticism, refusing assimilation by any doctrine or school of thought.

He loved art, music and literature for themselves, he embraced them directly, as permanent and intrinsic human values, and he was unwilling to subject them to ends other than aesthetic ones.

He was, moreover, utterly fair and equitable in his judgments and decisions, insisting during debates and discussions that every viewpoint receive a complete hearing. He was a man without adversaries, without enemies.

Taken from us in the prime of his life, he has nevertheless left an indelible imprint on the Department of Romance Languages, which will sorely miss his enthusiasm, his kindness, his generosity.

The Tufts community has lost an esteemed and beloved colleague.

Respectfully submitted,

Alan J. Clayton, Chairman
Howard Hunter
Georgette Pradal
Seymour Oliver Simches


Elizabeth Canny
Secretary of the Faculty