

LEIGH ROSS CHAMBERS OFFICIER DANS L'ORDRE DES PALMES ACADÉMIQUES FAHA

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. An influential and wide-ranging literary critic and theorist, Ross made significant contributions to the study of nineteenth-century French literature, narrative theory, and the testimonial writing associated with the AIDS crisis. Both in Sydney and in Ann Arbor, he was known as a dedicated and creative teacher of undergraduate and graduate students and a generous and insightful mentor to younger colleagues.

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 interrupted his studies to take up a two-year teaching position as Assistant d'anglais at the Collège moderne de Reims. He returned to Australia in 1955, completed a Diploma of Education, and taught French and German briefly at Sydney Boys' High School, before being appointed in 1957 to a Lectureship at the University of Queensland; he returned to the University of Sydney

as a Lecturer in 1959. Ross took up an appointment as Senior Lecturer at the University of New South Wales in 1964, and in 1972 he was appointed to the McCaughey Chair of French at the University of Sydney. In 1975 he accepted a chair in French at the University of Michigan, and some years later, on taking up the Marvin Felheim Distinguished University Professorship, 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 the issues raised by the study of literature. Ross's budgeted joint appointment was the first of its kind in what was then the Program in Comparative Literature, and served as a model for the subsequent appointments that enabled Comparative Literature to build a staffing establishment of its own and eventually to be transformed into a department.

Ross's initial scholarly achievements were in the field of French literature. Between 1969 and 1987 he authored five books published in Paris, three of them with the prestigious publisher José Corti: *Gérard de Nerval et la poétique du voyage* (1969), *La Comédie au château: Contribution à la poétique du théâtre* (1971), and *Mélancolie et opposition: Les débuts du modernisme en France* (1987), later translated into English as *The Writing of Melancholy: Modes of Opposition in Early French Modernism*.

Ross was not, however, content to remain within the intellectual ambit for which his encyclopaedic knowledge of French literature and his remarkable mastery of the French language had qualified him as a leading figure. Indeed, it would be misleading to align his work with the disciplinary domains he spent most of his life critiquing – French literature, cultural studies, narrative theory, and the like – though practitioners of those fields are quick to claim its contributions. His critique of French studies starts with his concern with the coherence of the model that yokes language and culture together as though they expressed the essence of a unitary people, but goes beyond this to investigate both the heterogeneity of language practices and the powers of literature. His critique of the models of subjectivity inherent in those very powers and practices takes him towards deep hesitation as to whether the two domains can solve each other's problems.

With his first books in English, *Meaning and Meaningfulness* (1979) and especially *Story and Situation: Narrative Seduction and the Power of Fiction* (1984), Ross turned his focus to comparative and theoretical studies in literature, particularly the nature of narrative and its role in both confirming and subverting relations of power, authority and domination. *Meaning and Meaningfulness* drew on structuralist models of discourse and on the theory of speech acts developed by the analytic philosopher J. L. Austin to develop an account of textuality to which the enunciative act is central: every text, every piece of speech or writing is informed by its rhetorical situation – the strategic force that it carries and the situationally specific ways in which it is received and understood. *Story and Situation* extended this account to understand narrative as a matter of power and authority: to tell a story is to organise it around the ‘point’ of the story, and that point has to do with the relation between teller and listener – with the attempt to persuade and with acceptance or rejection of that persuasion. Written narratives, where the sender and the receiver of the text are not immediate to each other, are more complex, and they tend to deal with the mediated negotiation of textual authority – at least in the case of sophisticated ‘literary’ texts – by means of a reflexive embedding of the speech situation in the story in such a way as to carry forward the seduction of the reader at the same time as they make visible the strategic mechanisms of that seduction.

These two books initiate what Professor Meaghan Morris has called ‘a set of major works transforming literary theory into an urgent, difficult practice of cultural thought about the politics of ‘poetics’ in life.’ Ross’s distinctive synthesis of sophisticated narratology and cultural critique received what is perhaps its most systematic expression in his influential *Room for Maneuver: Reading (the) Oppositional (in) Narrative*

(1991). Eight years later, his explorations of the subversive implications of literary forms and practices took a characteristically unsystematic turn with the publication of *Loiterature* (1999), an extended series of essays on the disorderly, digressive, unpredictable and anti-productive tendencies within literary discourse.

Two of his major works of criticism emerged, as his colleague David Caron put it, ‘from Ross’s response to the devastation of the AIDS crisis.’ In *Facing It: AIDS Diaries and the Death of the Author* (1998) and *Untimely Interventions: AIDS Writing, Testimonial, and the Rhetoric of Haunting* (2004) he asked, in Caron’s words, ‘how we can read testimonial writings in the aftermath of historical violence and collective trauma; what ethical obligations witnesses place on us, readers, to let ourselves be haunted and become, in turn, responsible for the memories our culture would rather keep at bay.’

An active scholar until very near the end of his life, Ross continued to explore the disciplinary fusion of literary with cultural studies in *Atmospherics of the City: Baudelaire and the Poetics of Noise* (2015).

Ross was a Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities and the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, an Officier dans l’Ordre des Palmes académiques (France), and a corresponding member since 1961 of the experimental literary group OULIPO (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle). His achievements as a scholar and teacher were recognized by many visiting appointments at leading universities, a Distinguished Faculty Achievement Award at the University of Michigan (1992), and an honorary doctorate from the Université de Neuchâtel, Switzerland (2001).

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