



PROJECT MUSE®

A Vocation for the Humanities: Honoring Richard Macksey

Hent de Vries

MLN, Volume 125, Number 5, December 2010 (Comparative Literature Issue), pp. 1003-1009 (Article)

Published by Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2010.0034>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/426804>

A Vocation for the Humanities: Honoring Richard Macksey*



Hent de Vries

Some weeks ago, I received an e-mail from someone somewhere in China, I think it was Beijing. It was sent by a prospective graduate student who had majored in English and was wondering whether he should consider applying to the Humanities Center when Prof. Macksey might no longer be there to give him feedback on the progress in his studies, which, as he implied, would undercut some of the rationale for his coming here and destroy the very image he had made for himself of our program. I think, I hope, I was successful in convincing him that, yes, he should apply by all means, and, yes, he would have ample opportunity to study with or otherwise learn and profit from Professor Macksey's presence and the omnipresent signs of his legacy on and around campus, among his many pupils, members of other faculties, and the like. A moving picture on Johns Hopkins's opening webpage was only the most visible among them, a lively video portrait of Dick Macksey on our departmental site another.

Indeed, since his studies in ancient mathematics at Princeton, the completion of his PhD at Johns Hopkins in 1957 with a dissertation on Marcel Proust, written in French, his early teaching career in the Writing Seminars, from 1958 onwards, and his subsequent directorship of the Humanities Center and affiliation with the Medical School in East Baltimore (where for many years he taught his course on "Physician and Society," invited countless speakers, such as Umberto

*These remarks were originally presented during a reception in honor of Richard Macksey on the occasion of his retirement and in recognition of his lasting contributions to Johns Hopkins and the world of letters, October 3, 2009.

Eco and Richard Rorty, Jack Barth and Paul Fussell, and organized an interdisciplinary conference on memory); indeed, given his many contributions to the flourishing of the Comparative Literature issue of *MLN*, to the editorial board of the Johns Hopkins University Press, in addition to his service as a general editor, together with Anthony J. Cascardi, for the book series "Literature, Culture, Theory," published by Cambridge University Press, his name and career have been intimately connected with this university. His many distinctions are merely the official confirmation of what everybody observed and appreciated all along.

In 1992, he received the university's George E. Owen Teaching Award, given annually for outstanding teaching and devotion to undergraduates. In 1999, he received the Distinguished Alumni Award from the Johns Hopkins Alumni Association. In the same year, a Professorship for Distinguished Teaching was established in his name by a former student, Edward T. Dangel III and his wife Bonni Widdoes, and a Richard A. Macksey Graduate Student Fellowship has helped run the Honors Program in the Humanities for many years. In 2010, he was among the recipients of the Heritage Award for his longstanding service.

But the e-mail also put a particular emphasis on what I, once again, realized was—and continues to be—a remarkable epoch of instruction in the Humanities at Johns Hopkins: an epoch that stretched over more than forty years and whose beginning and subsequent grandeur remained intimately connected with the name and intellectual persona as well as extraordinary radiance of this esteemed colleague, whose contributions and accomplishments as a teacher and scholar we were fortunate to celebrate this last academic year.

This connection is engraved in the institutional memory of the Humanities Center, in particular, and the wider Hopkins community, in general, and as the presence and appreciation of so many alumni gathered during the recent retirement reception for Professor Macksey proved beyond any doubt, it remains part of a chain of living memory that links impressions and anecdotes, readings and writings, tradition and innovation.

Some of this, but not all, dates all the way back to the famous colloquium, organized by Richard Macksey in close cooperation with Eugenio Donato and René Girard, which took place in October of 1966 and was devoted to "The Language of Criticism and the Sciences of Man." Its proceedings became the landmark study entitled *The Structuralist Controversy* and set an intellectual standard that no conference

in the humanities at Hopkins—or anywhere else in the United States, for that matter—has ever since been able to match and measure up to in intensity and sheer intellectual stature. When the late Edward Said spoke at a conference on *La Pensée voyageuse* (*Traveling Theory*), in Amsterdam in 1994, his opening reflections returned him to the lasting impressions his participation in the Hopkins event had made on his thinking and subsequent writings.

The conference itself was widely credited for having brought “French Theory” to these shores as it figured prominent thinkers such as Lucien Goldman, Jean Hyppolite, Roland Barthes, Jacques Lacan, Jacques Derrida, and Jean-Pierre Vernant. Some of them would become regular visitors and part of an arrangement that was initiated by Professor Michael Fried and that made so-called Associates of the Humanities Center temporary members of our faculty to the greatest profit of our students. In retrospect—and in a history no one else but Dick Macksey would be able and authorized to write—the conference will perhaps be remembered and counted as the founding event of our Center, even though it is clear that it was just the opening salvo of an ongoing series of visitors and conferences that would add more and more to the luster of the Center. As a consequence the Humanities Center, although a small operation, acquired an intellectual appeal and influence that was always somewhat disproportionate and hardly a function of its relatively small faculty and equally small cohort of talented and devoted graduate students.

But the famous conference did not remain an isolated event. Other workshops, such as the one co-organized by Richard Macksey and his colleague Gregory Nagy on the subject of *The Genealogy of the Epic* and a subsequent Johns Hopkins Centennial Conference which offered a first-time symposium on Charles Sanders Peirce (who had been expelled from these holy grounds in the early years of the university) followed suit in mapping out a new intellectual terrain. The interdisciplinary spirit with which these disciplinary competences were cultivated, together with the methodic freedom with which they were kept open in all directions, wherever thought would lead, have remained somewhat of a mystery, not least to those who witness it up close.

It was uncharted terrain and it is fair to say that its formal designations and curricular programs conveyed its true significance only in part. The Humanities Center that Dick Macksey helped found, built, and shape was a center alright, but technically speaking, a degree granting department, privileged to have its own select group of graduate students and a small cohort of honor students only; the center was

responsible for comparative literature and intellectual history as its two principal dissertation tracks on offer, but, at the same time, it did many other things besides. Indeed, with the formal establishment of an interdisciplinary program of studies in the humanities at Hopkins and as the two tracks steadily evolved a radically new type of inquiry was launched and a new generation of students, most of whom would turn out to be very successful academically, was nourished.

But in such a maverick and graduate student oriented center, where in principle “anything goes”—anything, that is, that is interesting and analyzed in a rigorous, historically grounded and conceptually compelling perspective of any kind—what could the modifier “comparative” (as in “comparative literature”) and “intellectual” (as in “intellectual history”) still mean?

Clearly, the Humanities Center’s faculty and students were and continue to be comparativists, but this not so much because they taught and explored different national literatures and their relationships (although they did and do that too), but because, as David Wellbery and John Bender have noted in *The Ends of Rhetoric*, “the academic discipline of comparative literature is the successor in the world of the post-Humboldtian university to the tradition of rhetorical doctrine and education that dominated literary study in Europe prior to the emergence of the national philologies” (vii). And while this would seem sufficient reason to motivate rethinking both the premises and the boundaries of this scholarly discipline, they add a second and “more urgent” consideration as to why reference to rhetoric “prompts reflection on the intellectual substance” and scope of this field:

Following the “theory wave” of the past two decades, comparative literature has increasingly become a discipline in which the conceptual foundations of literary study itself are being redrawn. The modifier “comparative” has therefore taken on a new meaning, referring no longer solely to the international dimension of the enterprise but also to its interdisciplinary and especially meta-critical character. To pursue comparative literature here meant to explore the connections that link literature to other fields of knowledge (such as art and medicine, philosophy and psychoanalysis). (vii–viii)

In other words, to compare meant from here on to draw on the “conceptual resources” of numerous disciplines.

Somehow the Humanities Center’s faculty and students were and continue to be intellectual historians, but not because they privileged ideas and the life of the mind over matter or treated it in distinctive historical terms (although they do that too), but because they tended

to take the past as an immense archive and repository that could still speak to present concerns as part of an ongoing conversation and as a domain that had, perhaps, not yet revealed its genuine potential. As Dick Macksey put it in an interview with Johns Hopkins's *Gazette*, in 1999, the Humanities Center thus became "a place where we could try out new curricular ideas and explore recent intellectual developments without a massive infusion of cash and administration. You can test concepts in the humanities and see if they fly, as in a lab, though the standards of proof are different" (qtd. in Rienzi).

Professor Macksey published several studies devoted to the emergence and promise of intellectual history, recalling and reclaiming the legacy of an Arthur Lovejoy, George Boas, and others. In a lengthy article contributed to the critical archive of *MLN*, published in 2002, and entitled "The History of Ideas at 80," he inscribed the Center's intellectual life in this larger tradition, dating it all the way back to the "History of Ideas Club," founded in 1923 (a distant echo of the "Metaphysical Club" that Charles S. Peirce had formed when he arrived in Baltimore in 1879 and that, in turn, dated back to the conversations in the 1860s in Cambridge which contributed to the rise of American pragmatism and moral perfectionism, as Louis Menand and others have demonstrated). As a matter of fact, well beyond its original conception the field of intellectual history accompanied that of comparative literature—and, later that of art criticism and the history of science, psychoanalysis and religion, philosophy and poetics—all along and this nowhere more intensely than in the Humanities Center. Of this venerable tradition, Dick Macksey presents a living example, demonstrating what inhabiting multiple universes of meaning and their complex interpretations and interrelations might mean for the practice of humanistic studies here and now.

Let me suggest, therefore, that in addition to the sketched institutional background and his crucial role in it, it is the incomparably and inimitable personal touch of Dick Macksey's teaching and scholarship that has left its imprint on so many among us. A restless, insomniac mind that turned a self-described "lack of focus"—indeed, a thinking by way of processing "chain reactions" (as his colleague Professor Neil Hertz once put it)—into an intellectual virtue and strength; an omnivorous reader and "polymath" whose horizon spanned centuries and opposing schools of thought, literary fiction and modern cinema, humanistic studies and medical narratives, Dick Macksey has always symbolized what I would like to call *a vocation for the humanities* that reaches well beyond the (inevitable) professionalization of the field

and the limitation of depth and breadth as well as intellectual openness and generosity it, sadly, entails.

Students know how to read this and have flocked to his seminars, while uncountable alumni carry it with them as a lesson for life and will appreciate it more than anyone else.

As those who came and were initially new to Johns Hopkins can testify, *chez Macksey* one would find Dick's and Catherine limitless hospitality and an open ear. While fondling some autograph of Marcel Proust in the vast private library, one would feel tapped into the immense archive of past learning and salient anecdotes, all of which made one realize that the old world humanistic scholarship that would have easily remained pedantic and dusty overseas was set free here by a liberating American irreverence that, paradoxically, proved it the greatest respect possible. For Proust, the beloved author to whom Macksey would devote numerous seminars and insightful articles (notably "The Architecture of Time: Dialectics and Structure"), deeply inspired by a longstanding Hopkins tradition dating back to Leo Spitzer, Georges Poulet, and René Girard, literally inhabited the same space in which American cinema, say, the films of a John Waters, could be savored and discussed well into the small hours. From Macksey's vast private collection of some 70,000 books, manuscripts, and films many other readings and publications would be distilled: on Longinus, Laurence Sterne, Henry James, Wallace Stevens, William Carlos Williams, and, last but not least, Francis Ford Coppola.

Today, we thank him for being such an inspiring teacher, the thriving force behind our Humanities Honors curriculum, an advocate of the study of the humanities at this great university (often sounding concern that its non-science departments not become too small), and the longtime editor-in-chief of the comparative literature edition of our home journal, *MLN*, whose first publication under new guidance features this special issue celebrating his achievements and service to the study of the humanities at Johns Hopkins.

We are grateful for his role as a mentor to his students and we will continue to raise funds for and give a prominent place to the Richard Macksey Graduate Student Fellowship, offering it to deserving students who will be selected by the faculty each year.

Luckily, the Humanities Center has found Prof. Macksey willing to continue to give an intensive course on topics of his choice in the humanities in the years ahead, when he assumes his new role as a Professor Emeritus.

On a personal note, I would like to thank Dick for having been,

together with Catherine, a spiritual and often material home for many among us here in the Center, at the Homewood campus, and beyond. It is that inspiring presence that we will continue to cherish and honor and that makes academic centers of learning what they are and should be.

Johns Hopkins University

WORKS CITED

- Bender, John and David E. Wellbery. Preface. *The Ends of Rhetoric: History, Theory, Practice*. Eds. John Bender and David E. Wellbery. Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990. vii–xi. Print.
- Macksey, Richard A. “The Architecture of Time: Dialectics and Structure.” *Proust: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Ed. René Girard. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall 1962, 104–21. Print.
- . “The History of Ideas at 80.” *MLN* 117.5 (2002): 1083–97. Print.
- Macksey, Richard A. and Eugenio Donato, eds. *The Structuralist Controversy: The Languages of Criticism and the Sciences of Man*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1972. Print.
- Menand, Louis. *The Metaphysical Club: A Story of Ideas in America*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001. Print.
- Rienzi, Greg. “Honor for Dr. Humanities: Richard A. Macksey Professorship is Endowed by a Former Student.” *The Gazette*. 21 June 1999. *The Gazette Online*. Web. 19 Dec. 2010.