

Memorial Minute for Frank Murphy, Professor Emeritus of English Language and Literature
Written and read at the April 24, 2023 Faculty Meeting
by Dean Flower, Professor Emeritus of English Language and Literature

(b. March 13, 1932, d. August 26, 2022)

The turning point in Francis Murphy's teaching career came in the spring of 1956, after two years at the University of Connecticut teaching Freshman English, and two quarters at the University of Minnesota as an Instructor among Harvard-trained Americanists like Leo Marx and J. C. Levenson. Out of the blue he fled Minnesota and came "home"—having grown up in Westfield, attending AIC in Springfield, and summering in the Berkshires—and entered the Jesuit novitiate in Lenox. He was miserable there, suffering migraines, and wisely departed, but with a fresh direction. He would study the Transcendentalists with Perry Miller at Harvard, he would occupy the same room in Divinity Hall that Ralph Waldo Emerson, that renegade preacher, once occupied. He would meet Helen Vendler who shared his interest in the post-Christian Wallace Stevens. She advised him to write a dissertation on Stevens "since no one was interested in Edward Taylor." Which he did, "The Concept of Nature in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens." But the Jesuits were not forgotten. Recently he quoted to me a line from Stevens that hinted at this: "To see the gods dispelled in mid-air and dissolve like clouds is one of the great human experiences." He would relive that liberation many times.

Frank arrived at Smith in 1959, the same year Thomas Mendenhall became president, and moved quickly up the ranks. He edited *The Diary of Edward Taylor* in 1962 and a gathering of critical essays, *Form and Structure in Poetry* in 1964, was co-editor of *The Massachusetts Review* from 1965 to 1967, and edited *Major American Poets to 1914* in 1967. When I first knew Frank he sat at President Mendenhall's side as secretary of the faculty, taking notes in expert shorthand. He went on to edit anthologies of critical essays (Walt Whitman, E. A. Robinson, Yvor Winters), the poetry of Walt Whitman, the prose of William Bradford, and—most recently—the early American period of *The Norton Anthology of American Literature*.

Meanwhile Frank's aestheticism grew apace. He had long collected American impressionist paintings, and began in 1976 a series of guest-curatorships at nearby museums—like the Museum of Fine Art in Springfield and the Hudson River Museum in Yonkers, producing catalogues for each. A typical title was "The Book of Nature: American Painters and the Natural. Sublime." His subjects ranged from Willard Leroy Metcalf and J. Francis Murphy (no relation) to Augustus St. Gaudens and "Democracy's Poet," Walt Whitman. Aesthetic fascination also led him to a Fulbright Award in Japan, at Tsuda Women's College in Tokyo (1971-72), and to Historic Deerfield which drew upon his extensive knowledge of American architecture, furniture, ceramics and textiles. He was a connoisseur to his fingertips, and a powerful influence on students and colleagues—even college presidents. He helped Jill Conway hire Richard Wilbur away from his post at Wesleyan, and he persuaded Tom Mendenhall to hire visitors like Eudora Welty, John Williams, Christopher Ricks, and Donald Davie. For a gathering of his closest friends last October, Helen Vendler who knew him best wrote that "Frank was the first person to show me the worth of Whitman . . . [He] saw the delicacy in Whitman, and the poet's fellow feeling matched Frank's own instinctive empathy with others." That, after all, was his spiritual calling.