

**Memorial Minute for Luc Gilleman, Professor of English
Read at the March 28, 2012 Faculty Meeting**

Our beloved friend and colleague, Luc Gilleman, Professor of English, died—
at home, in his sleep—in the early morning hours of Tuesday, February 28th, 2012.
He was 52. His death came after a three-year struggle with cancer; he leaves behind
him his wife, Sarah, and two children: Janna, 10, and Toby, 7.

Luc's route to Smith—and to the study of literature—was intriguingly
roundabout. He was born and grew up in the small coastal city of Oostende, on the
North Sea, in Flemish-speaking Belgium. Something of a wild-child, he was drawn to
the natural world, to the work-life of his uncle's near-by farm, and to the sea; yet his
sensitivity was also shaped by the devotional life of the city's Catholic culture—
Oostende is Trappist monastery country—and by his loss, later in boyhood, of that
intense faith. In his teenage years he worked summers on the Oostende-Dover
ferry; he studied biology, served in the Belgian army, and, at the age of 22, earned an
engineering degree in nautical electronics. After several years of service as a radio
navigation officer in the merchant marine, he left the sea for the study and the
library—earning first a master's degree in philology from the Free University of
Brussels, then, in 1994, a Ph.D. in English from Indiana University in Bloomington.
Though it is tempting, especially for another English professor, to construe this as a
conversion narrative, many of the interests and experiences that we glimpse in his
growing up found rich expression in his work on modern drama and in his broader
conception of human life: a lasting sense of the vivid and inevitable cruelties of farm
life; a fascination with systems, both living and non-living; with machines and their
operation; with the secrets of the way things work.

Luc Gilleman was one of the deepest, most original thinkers in the history of the Smith English Department—of course, as Luc might then have put it, that’s not saying much. I imagine this Luc-like joke as a way of saying that he wore his deep learning, his commitment to the intellectual’s quest, lightly, humbly, comically. And yet he burned. Art, for Luc, was not a producer of resolutions or grand truths; it was composed, rather, of all-but-strangled moments of meaning or beauty, wrested from the systemic cruelty or emptiness of the cosmos or the social world. Of these moments—especially in his work on the life of language in modern drama—Luc was the unrivalled chronicler. Scholars of John Osborne, of Harold Pinter, of Edward Bond, of Arthur Miller, of contemporary experimental drama will long be in Luc’s debt for the unexcelled acuity of his account of the meaning-life of dramatic dialogue. Luc once described O’Neill’s *Long Day’s Journey into Night*, in which storms of stunningly articulated loss and suffering die off into an exhausted silence, as “a decomposition composition”—that’s what I’ll remember: the strangely life-affirming exhilaration that came from witnessing Luc capture in language the spectacularly bleak vision of the writers he loved.

Luc was a devoted and hard-working citizen of this community, serving with particular distinction on the Grievance and Library Committees, but it was as a brilliant, transformative, almost excessively diligent teacher that he contributed the most to the life of the College. His classes in drama were famous for the student performances that, through his rigorous preparation and inexhaustible attentiveness, became not momentary entertainments but rich instruments of intellectual exploration. For Luc, as his course titles indicate—“Freud and Sherlock

Holmes,” “Bodies and Machines”—course design was a creative medium, and he was, I think, our most successful adviser of honors theses. But at the heart of his teaching was this: to visit one of Luc’s classes was to witness the exhilarating emergence of intellectual curiosity in communal form, its flight prepared for but never dominated by Luc’s guidance, its student-generated acuity the deepest tribute to the teacher’s skill.

It amused Luc, as he faced the arrival of the last phase of his illness, that he seemed to have lost his taste for the bleak works that had all along populated his artistic universe. In his last years, and months, and days, there was enough suffering and thwarted hope to confirm several times over the darkness of Luc’s intellectual vision. Yet there was also to be witnessed, in the place of his dying, in the world created by Luc, his beloved wife Sarah, his children Janna and Toby, an incandescent and immeasurable love.