

Memorial Minute in honor of Paul Pickrel
Read by Eric Reeves, at the January 28, 2015 Faculty Meeting

There is a wonderful moment in Jane Austen's *Emma*, Austen's best and Paul Pickrel's favorite novel, when Emma is described in an intimate third person, in terms that very much remind me of Paul himself: "A mind lively and at ease, can do with seeing nothing, and can see nothing that does not answer."

Paul found himself in a world in which there was nothing that did not "answer"—and in his solitary moments, which were many, he found he could do with "seeing nothing." Austen suggests that the world—however apparently circumscribed—is in fact unboundedly interesting; I think Paul found this to be the case as well. He may be the finest observer of the world, in all its dimensions, I've ever met.

Paul—as I recall him as a colleague in the English department and a close friend of more than 35 years—was relentlessly, almost instinctually drawn to what was interesting, challenging, beautiful, peculiar, and simply revealing of human behavior in all its forms. To be sure, it was human behavior in its linguistic form that most interested him, and drove many of his interests in later years, and to no author more than another "Austin" (spelled differently, of course)—J.L. Austin and his classic *How to do things with words*, published in 1962. Although the book is now judged by many to have been superseded by various work in linguistics and theories of language, Paul thought not. Very recently he finally finished an essay assessing Austin's ideas.

Language and linguistic behavior reveal what is most interesting about human beings and human culture: this might serve as a summary of Paul's mature philosophy, a word with which he would certainly not wish himself associated. Given Paul's relentlessly sharp wit, he was inevitably led to some extraordinary linguistic behavior of his own. He was unsparing, frequently scabrous, and inevitably hilarious. I can't on this occasion offer examples of what was most funny, but his humor knew few limits. In conversation he was incapable of being boring, and if he found himself caught in the boredom created by others, he simply changed the subject, often by means of a brilliant segue.

I last saw Paul this past March at his home in San Francisco, the Sequoias retirement community, where he had long ago become resident lecturer on any and all subjects. He was in good spirits and lively. If not the Paul of twenty years ago, he was nonetheless fully engaged and attentive, and still a wonderful conversationalist. He would have been 98 next week, sharing with James Joyce a "Ground Hog Day" birthday of February 2nd.

Paul was born near Galesburg, Illinois, where he grew up and returned frequently even after graduating from Knox College in 1938 and completing his doctorate at Yale University in 1944. His thesis adviser at Yale was the great student of language Robert Menner, from whom Paul inherited not only much of his passion for language but a complete set of the original volumes of the Oxford English Dictionary (then known as the New English Dictionary). The set has resided for many years in my Neilson Library office, and I hope to make a gift of it to the Mortimer Rare Book Room—a suitable final resting place, and one that would certainly please Paul.

Memorial Minute in honor of Paul Pickrel
Read by Eric Reeves, at the January 28, 2015 Faculty Meeting

His first teaching position was a year's appointment at Lafayette College in 1941, but he returned to Yale the following year, where he remained until coming to Smith in 1966. At Yale Paul taught and served in various capacities, none more important than as managing editor of the *Yale Review*, a prestigious and famously well-edited publication. He was editor of the *Review* for seventeen years, during which time he also published a novel, *The Moving Stair* and served as chief book critic for *Harper's Magazine*.

When Paul came to Smith he had an almost immediate impact on the teaching of the English novel. Although I have heard Paul lecture on several occasions, I never had the privilege of watching him teach what was then our great "19th / early 20th-Century Novel" course, identified perhaps too much with him and thus making it in some ways impossible to inherit, especially given Paul's aversion to "theory" as it became increasingly fashionable.

What did Paul's students learn, at least the good ones? They would of course learn something of style, character, and narrative structure; but they would also learn something about the value of a full and acute attention to linguistic detail, and the ways in which language can be used for various narrative purposes. They would learn just how subtle irony can be in the hands of a writer as skilled as Austen. And they would certainly have learned something about English grammar and clarity of speech. It was with good reason and much success that later in his career Paul began to teach a course on "The English Language Today."

Paul spoke largely in beautifully articulated, if sometimes abrupt, sentences. Grammatical errors grated on him with an almost amusing harshness. I was the beneficiary of a couple of subtle grammar lessons myself early in my career at Smith. And it would take only one correction by Paul—cast in either the first or third person—to make me realize what I had done, and what I must do to ensure that such an offense against language was never again my doing. "One typically hears that rendered as...", or, "we usually say...", or "I think you mean..."

On a more elevated note, Paul gave the Engel lecture for 1994-95, "On Recalling the 1930s." It was a brilliant tour de force, and one that made present a decade largely unknown in any personal sense for nearly all of us in his audience—and at the same time gave us a wonderful account of how memory, including historical memory, works.

I won't try to summarize the unexpected outpouring of scholarly and critical work that followed immediately upon Paul's retirement in from teaching in 1985. Ideas that had clearly been with him for years were turned into essays, and the essays on Austen in particular were brilliant. They treated several of the novels, but none more attentively than *Emma*. One example will have to suffice: his 1985 essay in *Nineteenth Century Fiction*—"Lionel Trilling and *Emma*: A Reconsideration."

Memorial Minute in honor of Paul Pickrel
Read by Eric Reeves, at the January 28, 2015 Faculty Meeting

For a great many years following its publication as the Introduction to the Riverside Edition of *Emma*, an essay by Lionel Trilling defined the terms of critical debate about the novel. Paul was deeply skeptical of some of Trilling's key assumptions, and began his essay on *Emma*, taking dead-aim at Trilling's celebrated argument about the protagonist's "snobbery"...and demolished it. With impeccable logic and a keen understanding of the setting of the novel as well as the range of human motives in play, Paul revealed various of Trilling's claims to be unsubstantiated by the text, or in fact contradicted by it. *Emma* had been done its due, at least in the prevailing critical ethos.

Paul published more on Jane Austen, as well as one particularly interesting essay on Hardy's troubling novel *Jude the Obscure*, which appeared in the *Hudson Review* in 1986. And yet more would follow.

Paul had many friends at Smith, and an even wider range of friends in the Northampton community. Paul walked everywhere, and often his walks were of very considerable length. He may have been the only person in the world who never learned to drive—or to type (he did have a beautiful writing hand), or use a cell phone, or swim. Many modern technologies were either beyond him because of his lack of typing ability, or simply didn't seem worth his time. Paul once had me create a message for his new telephone answering machine, which had thoroughly baffled him. He gave me precise instructions about the greeting: "Mr. Pickrel is at present not available; if you wish to leave a message, he may respond at a later time."

His walks led him almost every morning to Jake's for breakfast, and he was ready for the day. Lunch was typically a social affair and among the friends who so frequently joined him at Davis Center were myself, my colleague Doug Patey, former history professor Jack Wilson, and Ron Macdonald, a colleague whose death it was my sad duty to speak about from this same spot in 2002.

Ron and Paul were during their time at Smith often inseparable, deeply involved in one another's lives—intellectual, literary, linguistic, and otherwise. Given their particular gifts, they were made for one another. Sometime before Ron died, there was a painful falling off between the two men, one that could not be remedied. Paul deeply regretted this for the rest of his life. My hope—and I know it would be Paul's—is that by recalling both on this occasion, I've reconciled them just a bit, if only posthumously.

Paul was a great reader, and great thinker about language, and indefatigably interesting and interested. The world is a different place without him.

Eric Reeves
Professor of English Language and Literature