

Memorial Minute for Harold Skulsky, Mary Augusta Jordan Professor Emeritus of English Language and Literature

Written and Read by William Oram, Helen Means Professor Emeritus of English Language and Literature at the February 3, 2021 Faculty Meeting

Harold Skulsky, a brilliant, passionate, funny and at times infuriating member of the English Department, died in New York City on August 25th at the age of 85. The exhilaration of reading his six deceptively-colloquial, densely-argued books lies in the sense that the issues in the writers he discusses—issues of God’s nature, free will, personhood—matter intensely. In their bracing bleakness, his accounts usually differ greatly from the “standard” readings.

Harold received his BA from Columbia, and his Ph.D. from Harvard, taught briefly at Johns Hopkins and the University of Wisconsin before coming to Smith in 1965, where he worked for the next forty years. He taught famously difficult courses on early modern writers, including a survey course in which I participated and from which it’s an understatement to say that I learned a great deal. He was always surprising: I learned only recently that he was a skilled draftsman and I never knew that he wrote poetry until I saw some in print.

He made himself into a great scholar. He worked in nine languages and, indeed, was one of the few critics able to read all the texts that John Milton read in their original tongues. Equally at home in literature and philosophy, he had an additional interest in what we now call early modern science and contributed to the Kahn Institute’s first project on Galileo. He read a great range of texts with clarity and precision. His second book, on metamorphosis as it raises problems of identity in Western literature, starts with Ovid and ends with Kafka. His passionate inquiry focused on the period between the middle ages and the enlightenment, when a view of the world as ordered and governed by a beneficent providence gave way to views of the world in which these certainties come into question. Harold traced the skeptical attempts of writers, most importantly Shakespeare, Milton and Spinoza, to test conventional beliefs about moral categories and human dignity. He saw Milton as making a desperately honest attempt to argue the case for God’s goodness in the face of the world’s evil, a defense only partly successful.

Harold was not an easy person to have in one's Department. For him, intellectual work was an essential stay against confusion, and in evaluating the work of others he was often rigid and polemical. Yet over time he mellowed. As Secretary of the Propositional Task Force, a group of philosophers from the Five Colleges, Harold was, John Connolly tells me, scrupulous in summarizing papers of which he strongly disapproved. He had indeed a deeply sociable nature, was fond of long conversations about books and film and families. He told very funny stories and, like Woody Allen, made himself the butt of his own jokes. Shortly after he moved to New York, he recounted how, in remodeling his bathroom, he was cheated by a plumber who never bothered to connect the new sink to the wall. He made the events—which must have been infuriating—into a hilarious account of his hapless attempts to get the plumber to finish the job.

Harold left Smith fifteen years ago, for love. He moved to New York City to marry Betty Nitzberg, about whom he said “we laugh together,” and with whom, during the summer, he often came to concerts at Tanglewood and occasionally to the valley. In New York he taught, primarily in Departments of Philosophy, at Hofstra and Suffolk Community College, finished his sixth book, on Spinoza, and worked on a final manuscript about philosophy and philosophical fictions, from Plato to Kant and G.E. Moore, *King Lear to Waiting for Godot*. He called it “The Meaning of Life” and while the provisional title suggests an irony about its own ambition, it also states, dead center, what mattered to him. Those who loved him will miss him greatly. He leaves his wife Betty, his children, Sabina, Livia, Eva and Eli, his stepdaughter, Mira, and seven grandchildren.