DOCUMENTS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR ANTHONY CHANNELL HILFER

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Anthony Channell Hilfer, professor, English, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
ANTHONY CHANNELL HILFER

Anthony Channell Hilfer, Iris Howard Regents Professor of English Literature at The University of Texas, died tragically on April 11, 2008, in a two-car accident in Austin, Texas. He was 71 years old. Tony received his B.A. from Middlebury College in 1958, his M.A. from Columbia University in 1960, and his Ph.D. from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in 1963. He joined the Department of English at The University of Texas at Austin in 1963 and, after a long 45-year career, was planning to retire at the end of the semester in which he died.

Tony Hilfer was a renowned scholar of popular genres, including crime fiction and film noir. His interest in popular culture may be traced back to his early life. Born in Hollywood, California, he became acquainted at an early age with the glamour of the film industry, as well as its inner workings. He was among a group of literary critics and writers who brought popular genres into the university classroom in the tumultuous years following the 1960s—those who recognized that contemporary pulp fiction may indeed merit a place alongside the works of Shakespeare and Chaucer, writers who themselves worked in the popular genres of their day. Tony’s highly influential book, The Crime Novel: A Deviant Genre (University of Texas Press, 1990), was among the first to define the characteristics of crime fiction as distinct from other variants, including mysteries and suspense novels, and to provide a critical treatment of that unsettling genre. In Tony’s crowded office extra shelving crammed with the cheap paperback crime novels that made his critical reputation occupied the central space between two walls filled with literary classics: a metaphor for the inclusive richness of his literary imagination.

Tony also edited American Fiction since 1940, an important anthology of contemporary American writing published by Longman (1992), and, for 14 years, he was the editor and co-editor of Texas Studies in Language and Literature (TSLL), the flagship literary journal of the English department. Recognizing the crucial importance of his editorship to the success of the journal, TSLL has established a yearly prize in his honor. He was also the author of numerous other books, articles, and reviews on a wide array of topics in American literature and culture. A powerful critical intellect, Tony brought his life experiences and his vast reading to bear on the theoretical debates of his discipline, especially those surrounding postmodernism, post-structuralism, and cultural studies. Extremely curious about breaking developments in literary theory, he nevertheless opposed certain aspects of the discourse that used to be fashionable in American universities. He was our resident skeptic, impatient with what he saw as jargon and pretension, but determined not to turn away from contemporary intellectual engagements. His recent book, The New Hegemony in Literary Studies: Contradictions in Theory (Northwestern University Press, 2003), took a polemical stand against what he saw as the dogmatism of some schools of criticism and won him the admiration of playwright David Mamet.

Although Tony had decided to retire, he was not contemplating scholarly superannuation. Most recently, he had taken up a new theoretical and political cause in his work: eco-criticism. He perceived the destruction of the environment and the crisis of global warming as an immense problem that must no longer be evaded or ignored. His final manuscript, “The Nothing that Is: Representations of Nature in American Writing,” was his visionary plea that we pay attention to the earth—and not just to fictional or poetic representations of it. Indeed, he believed, our survival depends on this attention. The opening sentence of this new book announces his intention to abjure “the sentimentality and humanization frequently found in nature writings,” yet the preface is paradoxically informed by his human passion for wild and inhospitable places. It is sad that he did not live to
see the gradual beginnings of the green change he desired.

Tony’s students deeply appreciated his wide-ranging intellect and the care he took to nurture their intellectual development. Betty Sue Flowers, director of the LBJ Library and Museum at The University of Texas, said of him:

He was so important to me—from the moment I took my first class from him as a nineteen-year-old, he inspired me with his love of literature and his intelligent curiosity about everything. He was a pure soul, very beautiful. I took as many courses from him as I could and asked him to direct my undergraduate honors thesis, which he did so well that it was published and helped me greatly in landing the job at UT—which, of course, was central to my life. I last saw him in Starbucks briefly, and he was his cheery, dark, generous, present self. How I will miss his being in this world!

At his memorial service, numerous friends, colleagues, and former students expressed their sadness about Tony’s untimely death, but they also celebrated his scholarly legacy and his rich, full life. To the strains of a New Orleans jazz band, they shared funny, touching stories about his love for his family, his son Thomas, and his second wife, Jane. Many faculty members approach retirement with ambivalence, but not Tony. He had plans for a future filled with books, writing, nature, music, and travel; a future filled, above all, with Jane. Jane remade his life, and turned his last 14 years into an improbable idyll, the American dream of the second chance, Gatsby’s green light at the end of the dock. Like Gatsby’s dream, Tony’s was destroyed by a car accident but not before it had been fully realized. Unlike Gatsby, Tony experienced to the full the happiness he wanted. He was an unsentimental skeptic turned hopeless romantic by the flowering of a late love.

Tony loved the skeptical British poet, Philip Larkin, and once electrified a roomful of extremely respectable people by his recitation of the poem everybody knows, the one that begins, “They fuck you up, your mum and dad.” On the shelf directly behind his office chair sat a copy of Larkin’s Collected Poems, heavily annotated in Tony’s spiky backward-slanting hand. Larkin’s poem, “An Arundel Tomb,” describes a funerary monument in Chichester Cathedral on which a married couple lie side by side, holding hands. The observer questions the validity of this physical emblem of enduring fidelity, which he describes as an “untruth.” In his copy, which was bought before he married Jane, Tony had made a sardonic marginal note to the effect that the romantic gesture of the linked hands was added as part of a Victorian repair job, and at the end of the poem he copied in Larkin’s disenchanted comment, “Love isn’t stronger than death just because statues hold hands for 600 years.” But Larkin’s grammar, which corrals his skepticism into the penultimate line and ends the poem with a direct declarative romantic statement, tells a different story, and that story belongs to the Tony who married Jane.

Time has transfigured them into
Untruth. The stone fidelity
They hardly meant has come to be
Their final blazon, and to prove
Our almost-instinct almost true:
What will survive of us is love.

Tony is survived by his wife, Jane; his son, Tom Hilfer of Harper, Texas. He is also survived by Jane’s daughters and their families, Kathryn and George Hillhouse and their sons, Sam and Henry of Austin; and Molly and Hunt James and their children, Maddie and Miles of Tampa, Florida.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Elizabeth Cullingford (chair), Dolora Chapelle-Wojciehowski, and Joseph Kruppa.

Distributed to the dean of the College of Liberal Arts, the executive vice president and provost, and the president April 29, 2009. This resolution is posted under “Memorials” at:
http://www.utexas.edu/faculty/council/.