DOCUMETS OF THE GENERAL FACULTY

REPORT OF THE MEMORIAL RESOLUTION COMMITTEE FOR DOUGLASS S. PARKER

The special committee of the General Faculty to prepare a memorial resolution for Douglass S. Parker, professor emeritus, classics, has filed with the secretary of the General Faculty the following report.

Sue Alexander Greninger, Secretary
The General Faculty

IN MEMORIAM
DOUGLASS S. PARKER

Douglass Stott Parker was a jazz improvisationalist trapped in a classicist’s body. Or maybe his genius spirit was poured into a classics professor’s physical form as a reward from the Fates. Imagine Kurt Vonnegut teaching classics and you will have some idea of who Douglass Parker was and what he meant for over forty years to the community of scholars and students at The University of Texas at Austin.

The key to Douglass’ peculiar genius is found in a self-description in one of his course syllabi: “[he] rarely [thought] of himself as an academic, but rather as an itinerant trombonist who took a wrong turn about 1946; he [was] known to venture the opinion that man’s highest achievement is jazz improvisation.”

Born in La Porte, Indiana, on May 27, 1927, he served in the U.S. Navy as seaman second class from 1945 to 1946. This was arguably the only period in his life when what he was doing could be categorized as second class: his varied work was always first-rate and original. The wrong turn Douglass claims to have taken was toward obtaining a B.A. with distinction and honors in Greek from the University of Michigan in 1949 and a Ph.D. in classics from Princeton University in 1952 where he wrote a dissertation on Epicurean imagery in Lucretius’ De Rerum Natura. After three years as an instructor at Yale University (1952-55), Douglass rose to the rank of full professor at the University of California, Riverside (1955-68) before coming to The University of Texas at Austin where he served as full professor for forty years until his retirement in 2007.

Douglass took satisfaction—not pride, for he had little vanity—in having published articles on “’Donna Lee’ and the Ironies of Bebop” and on Tolkien. His CV includes such works of whimsy as parodies of Raymond Chandler mysteries on Latin grammar. “Vale, Pulchra Mea Sententia” (Farewell, My Lovely Sentence) is one example.

He was best known for his translations of Greek and Roman comedy: Aristophanes’ Acharnians (1961), Wasps (1962), Lysistrata (1964), Ecclesiazousae [Congresswomen] (1967); Terence’s Phormio and The Eunuch (1967); and Plautus’ Menæchmi and Bacchides (1999). His Congresswomen was a finalist for the National Book Award in translation. His Lysistrata has been produced hundreds of times. All these translations are still in print and much used.

In the Plan II Honors program over the course of thirty years, Douglass offered separate seminars on each of the following: pastoralism, serendipity, improvisation, fragments, creativity, and the way the world ends—Douglass could make either a bang or a whimper fascinating. For thirty-five years, he taught almost yearly a course on parageography, in which he surveyed imaginary worlds and spaces from the “Apologia” of Homer’s Odyssey to Tolkien’s “Middle Earth,” and beyond. An advanced version of the course took up Ovid, Ariosto, Dante, and Nabokov. The most imaginative among such worlds were the ones Douglass envisioned himself.

Along with the late Professor Gareth Morgan, Douglass kept alive in the Department of Classics the vanishing arts of reading and performing works of Greek and Roman literature in the original and in translation. Group readings and performances of Douglass’ translations, published and unpublished, have been frequent events in the department for decades. His translation of Seneca’s Apocolocyntosis, to which he gave the title The
Heavensgate Deposition or Claudius, the Gourd, was performed at the annual national meeting of the American Philological Association in 2003. Its success was a main factor for adding performance as a regular feature at the annual meetings in the field of classics ever since.

Douglass’ academic honors included a fellowship at the Harvard Center for Hellenic Studies (1961-62) and a Guggenheim fellowship (1985), but his greatest tribute may have been the honor that the diverse personalities who taught or studied alongside him for forty years at UT Austin felt it was to have known him. His witticisms were always kind, his criticisms always gentle and helpful, his encouragement always welcome, his erudite comments never for self-display. Whether playing trombone with un-jazzy restraint while members of the department sang Christmas carols, giving his colleagues or students books he thought would open up new vistas for them, or encouraging them to push beyond often self-imposed barriers, Douglass was an inspiration and a humanist through and through.

The 2011 issue of the journal Didaskalia opens with a remembrance of Douglass Parker from members of its advisory and editorial boards: http://www.didaskalia.net/issues/8/1/. They, like all those who knew Douglass at UT Austin, are glad he took a wrong turn way back when.

This memorial resolution was prepared by a special committee consisting of Professors Thomas Palaima (chair), Timothy Moore, and Stephen White.

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