MEMORIAL RESOLUTION OF THE FACULTY OF THE UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN-MADISON

ON THE DEATH OF PROFESSOR EMERITA MARY LYDON

Mary Lydon, Pickard-Bascom professor of French emerita, died on April 29, 2001. A brilliant scholar of national and international reputation as well as an inspiring and innovative teacher, Professor Lydon had a major influence on the intellectual life of the Department of French and Italian during her eighteen years at the University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Professor Lydon was born on July 27, 1937 in Stranorlar, County Donegal, Ireland. She started her graduate work at the National University of Ireland, where she received her B.A. degree in French and English in 1958 and her M.A. degree in French literature in 1960. At the same time, she earned a “Diplôme de culture contemporaine” from the “Institut des Professeurs de Français à l’Etranger” affiliated with the Sorbonne in Paris. After leaving Ireland, Professor Lydon went to Canada and received her doctorate degree from the University of Alberta in 1974. She then started her academic career in the University of Wisconsin System. She was appointed as a lecturer at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, first in the Department of French and Italian (1974-76), then in the Department of Comparative Literature (1977-81) and in the Department of English (1981). She joined the Department of French and Italian on our campus in 1983 as assistant professor; she was promoted to associate professor with tenure in 1986, and to professor in 1989. She retired during the spring semester 2001.

Professor Lydon received various academic honors and awards at the University of Wisconsin-Madison: a fellowship at the Institute for Research in the Humanities (1988), a Vilas associateship (1990-92), a Faculty Development Grant (1991), and eleven Summer Research Stipend Awards from our Graduate School. During the academic year 1998-99, she was the recipient of an NEH Fellowship for University Teachers. In the Fall of 2000, she was awarded a Pickard-Bascom professorship.

A specialist of twentieth-century literature, Professor Lydon focused on various domains, ranging from the French novel to psychoanalysis, feminist and post-structuralist theory, as is reflected in her two books: Perpetuum Mobile: A Study of the Novels and Aesthetics of Michel Butor (University of Alberta Press, 1984) and Skirting the Issue: Essays in Literary Theory (University of Wisconsin Press, 1995). The latter work challenges the boundaries between literature and theory. Her impressive record of publication also includes twenty-five articles, eight book chapters, seven translations, and seven book reviews. Professor Lydon was a widely recognized and respected authority on French literary theory in the United States and abroad. In her interpretations of texts, she combined her conceptual mastery of French philosophical thought and literary theory with rigorous analytical skills reflecting her refined aesthetic sensibility. At the time of her death, Professor Lydon was completing a book project on Samuel Beckett, “Idiom and Medium: Beckett’s Bilingual Oeuvre in the Context of his Irish Identity,” as well as a translation of the French philosopher Jean-François Lyotard’s work, Discours, Figure.

Professor Lydon was a source of inspiration to many students, at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Her courses included authors and critics such as Barthes, Derrida, Colette, Proust, and Sartre. From fourth-semester French to graduate seminars, Professor Lydon was able to combine her philosophy of teaching with her own intellectual quest and fascination for language and literature. She was eager to help students improve their writing skills and, above all, to develop their sensitivity to the effect and power of the written word, as an essential step in the process of interpreting as well as deriving pleasure from literary texts. Professor Lydon was an innovative teacher and one of the first colleagues in the Department of French and Italian to experiment with “Intensive Writing” courses and to use electronic mail in her teaching. As a member of the Teaching Academy, she contributed to the ongoing debates on fundamental pedagogical issues as well as on the nature of teaching within our university.

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Professor Lydon was extremely active in scholarly meetings and was invited on numerous occasions to present her work; she delivered more than seventy papers in the United States and in Europe. During the summer of 1998, she was a guest speaker at the prestigious Centre Culturel International de Cerisy-la-Salle, France. Professor Lydon was president of the Midwest Modern Language Association (1991-92), a member of the Executive Committee of the Modern Language Association Division of Twentieth-Century French Literature (1991-94), and an elected member of the Delegate Assembly of the Modern Language Association (1995). She was also the editor of the Beckett Circle, an international newsletter of the Samuel Beckett Society, and assistant editor of The French Review. At the University of Wisconsin-Madison, Professor Lydon served on important committees such as the Humanities Divisional Committee, the Nominations Committee, the Graduate School Administrative Committee, the UW-Press Committee, the Honorary Degree Committee, and the Friends of the Library Committee.

The Department of French and Italian and the University of Wisconsin are very fortunate to have counted Professor Lydon among their faculty. We have been greatly inspired by her boundless intellectual curiosity and brilliance, her enthusiasm, and her wit. We will miss her passionate stances and eloquent statements during discussions over departmental matters or issues related to the profession. Well aware that the future of French Studies depends on the rigorous and thought-provoking learning environment we create for our students, Professor Lydon was always eager to foster an “intellectual community” within her department and never hesitated to challenge opinions that did not reflect the highest standards.

Professor Lydon is survived by her husband, Professor Emeritus Herbert Hill, and by her children, Rory Lydon and Katherine Lydon.

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