



## IN MEMORIAM

Irving Putter  
Professor of French, Emeritus  
UC Berkeley  
1917 – 2009

Professor Irving Putter, a longtime member of the Department of French at the University of California, Berkeley, died at Kaiser Hospital in Oakland on April 24, 2009, in his 92nd year. Death was the result of a heart attack suffered some 10 days earlier.

He was born on New York's Lower East Side on December 3, 1917. His mother died when he was only 12 years old; this tragic loss may well have contributed to the development of what seems later to have been a fairly austere view of life. He studied humanities at the City College of New York under the great Morris Raphael Cohen at a time when instruction was demanding and competition among the largely male students was very keen, even aggressive. Putter managed in this competitive atmosphere to hold his own and soon developed intellectual and moral traits that were to stay with him throughout his career: rigorous logic, an argumentative stance, and unfailing honesty. These characteristics would mark not only his personal but also his professional life.

Admitted with a teaching assistantship to the M.A. program at the University of Iowa in 1943, he received the degree with an exhaustive study of theory and practice in Voltaire's theater. This and other encounters with French thinkers in the Cartesian tradition contributed no doubt to the development of an outlook that demanded much of others and of himself. His exacting and skeptical view of humankind drew him ever closer to a pervasive pessimism that only married life and a family seemed to mitigate. Friendship seemed difficult for him, despite an underlying need for warmth and understanding; once given, however, his loyalty was unshakeable.

When, after World War II, he was admitted to the French Department at Yale University, Putter encountered true sympathy in the person of Henri Peyre. Like most students in that select group at that time, he benefited from the tolerance and encouragement of this remarkable man — scholar, teacher, father- confessor and friend — who, as chair, had gathered a superlative group of faculty colleagues. At the end of his first year at Yale he was awarded the Mary Cady Tew Prize for excellence, followed each year for the rest of his stay at Yale with the grant of a Junior Sterling Fellowship.

This collegial atmosphere allowed Putter to respond in kind and to blossom with publications on topics mainly from — but not limited to — the literary and cultural movements of the nineteenth century, like Leconte de Lisle and his Contemporaries or a translation (still in print) of Chateaubriand's *Atala* and *René*, before receiving wide acclaim and international attention with the first of two volumes on the pessimism of Leconte de Lisle. The complete study appeared after his arrival in Berkeley in 1947; it was followed in the next two decades by a dozen ancillary articles that cemented his reputation as the foremost scholar and critic working on Leconte de Lisle in his time and since. This groundbreaking work was accompanied by many reviews and substantial bibliographies published in learned journals. Notable in all of his writings is an acute intelligence and a rare gift of style.

Putter's early years at Berkeley were marked by University controversy and serious disagreement in the department, centering largely around the House Un-American Activities Committee hearings in San Francisco and the protests over the loyalty oath. Although these divisive events did little to ameliorate his view of human nature, neither did they, as they did for some, impede his scholarly output, which remained at a high level. He was granted tenure in 1952 and promoted to professor six years later.

In 1960, he was awarded a Guggenheim grant and spent the year in Paris with his family. He further received several Berkeley Faculty Research Fellowships. He was appointed in 1970 as temporary co-chair of the French department (with Professors Basil Guy and Walter E. Rex) and subsequently became for a time department chair. Obligated by University regulations then in vigor to retire at the age of 70, he would have much preferred to keep on as an active member of the department.

In retirement his life was filled with trips abroad, including a memorable one to Asia after 1973, and with visits to old friends and colleagues, until his health went into serious decline; he eventually had four bypass operations. Intellectually vigorous as ever, he continued until his death to take pleasure in wide reading and reflection, especially in literature and politics in a global perspective.

He was twice married and is survived by both former spouses: Martha, of Philadelphia, and Lucie (Kim) Smith of Walnut Creek, California; by two children from his first marriage: Paul of Santa Clara, California, and Candace Putter (George) of Wynnewood, Pennsylvania; and by four grandchildren: Rebecca of Cambridge, Massachusetts, Benjamin and Samuel of Wynnewood, Pennsylvania, and Nicolas of Pomona, California.

Basil J.  
Guy  
2009  
Leonard W. Johnson