In Memoriam

EUGENE VANCE
1934-2011

Eugene Vance, Professor Emeritus of French and Comparative Literature at the University of Washington, Seattle, died May 14, 2011, when a plane he was piloting crashed at Arlington Municipal Airport near Seattle. Vance joined the faculty at the University of Washington in 1990. Raised in Newton, Massachusetts, Vance discovered his lifelong passion for medieval literature at Dartmouth College (where he was also an accomplished skier) from which he obtained his B.A. in 1957. He studied for his doctorate at Cornell University, which awarded him the Ph.D. in 1964. From 1962 to 1969, he taught English and French at Yale University. He subsequently taught at the Université de Montréal and at Emory University before moving to Seattle. Vance also held visiting professorships at the University of Toronto, Johns Hopkins University, the University of California at Berkeley, Duke University, and the Hebrew University in Jerusalem.

Vance published five books: *Reading the "Song of Roland"* (1972), *L'Archéologie du signe*, coedited with Lucie Brind'Amour (1983), *Mervelous Signals:Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages* (1986), *From Topic to Tale: Logic and Narrativity in the Middle Ages* (1987), and *The Dragon and the Unicorn: The Rhetoric and Discourse of Power in Premodern Court Culture*, coedited with David Knechtges (2002). He also edited volume 45 of *Yale French Studies, Language as Action*, in 1970.

Few scholars in our time have thought about the writings of Saint Augustine as persistently and passionately as Eugene Vance. Augustine's dictum that "faith inquires, but reason discovers and confirms," was axiomatic for him, although in Gene's case, the "faith" in question was his belief in Augustine's unparalleled genius in recognizing that a relig-

ion of the embodied Word, the Logos, desperately needed a new theory of signs to teach believers why it was so revolutionary. But, for Gene, Augustine's sophisticated and complex sign theory was just as radical as the religion it was meant to teach. For Gene marveled at the skill with which Augustine combined his exposition of sign theory with man's search not simply for the origin of truth but also for the understanding of the self and its relation to the world that came from understanding how words mean.

Like most students, Gene first experienced Augustine while reading *The Confessions*, his spiritual autobiography. Anyone who ever heard Gene talk about this prototype of great Western literature remembers his pleasure at recounting the subtlety by which Augustine's rhetorical power transforms Virgil's *Aeneid*—the epic of the founding of secular Rome—into an intensely personal meditation on discovering his own spiritual "Rome" through the sacred texts that his mentor, Saint Ambrose, had taught him to read. Gene rightly saw *Confessions* as a pedagogical treatise showing how humans achieve spiritual awakening either with the help of a teacher or through the mediation of literary works where the author assumes the role of pedagogue by dialectically engaging questions, answers, and examples. He would go on to tell you how trenchantly *Confessions* illustrates themes from the saint's other treatises that merge classical rhetoric with Christian doctrine: e.g., *De doctrina christiana, De Trinitate, De magistro, De libero arbitrio,* etc.

Unlike many of us, Gene did not limit his knowledge of Augustine to the major texts. He read widely in, and even perhaps *all* of, the saint's work and, naturally, in Latin. As a result of this deep understanding, Gene came to realize the extent to which the vernacular literature evolving in France in the twelfth century adapted a version of the *Bildungsstruktur* familiar from the works of Augustine.

Very much in the mold of the saint's own spiritual odyssey, vernacular romance, Gene showed, created heroes initially confused by the bewildering panoply of sensory data confronting them on every side. The task of romance in his view was to portray the world as a series of complex, seemingly unconnected signs that baffle the untutored protagonist.

By trial and error, but always with the advice of sages who appear at crucial moments to teach him how to "read" the chaos of competing signs, the hero gradually makes his way through a labyrinth of forking paths, acquiring knowledge (if not yet wisdom) along the way.

This pattern suggested to Gene that narrative coherence per se was of secondary concern to romance poets. It was the episodes themselves (*aventures* in Old French), each organized around a symbolic topic or theme, which mattered. An *aventure* thus appeared as a "problem," configured in a defamiliarized, even quasi-surreal, setting, which posed a new complex of signs to decipher. By traversing a series of such *aventures* or topics, the hero gradually learns that the opacity of the world and its social structures do not cohere naturally; their unity, meaning, and significance for the individual's knowledge of self and the world reside in the symbolic and mystical patterns underlying them, which is to say that the hard-won key to this vision—as Augustine never ceased to argue—lies in spiritual maturity.

Spiritual maturity for knights—whose sphere of action lay in the secular world—required the ability to put into practice principles of reading attentively the book of nature so as to perceive eternal truths—that is, the wisdom to know God—underlying the confusing chaos of everyday life. As Gene showed, the "topic" of perceiving an underlying moral order amid the cacophony of the material world conformed to a model of "guided reading" proposed by Augustine in *De magistro* and *De Trinitate.* In formulating his model of directed reading, Augustine sought to "direct the arts once more toward their Greek ideal as instruments of truth. This redirection entailed a reformation of the arts, and most especially of the language arts which are essentially implicated with the interior formal acts of cognition by which men understand and are illuminated."[1]

[1] George G. Leckie, preface to *"Concerning the Teacher"* (*"De magistro"*) *and "On the Immortality of the Soul"* (*"De immortalitate animae*"), by Saint Aurelius Augustine, Bishop of Hippo, trans. George G. Leckie (New York: D. Appleton-Century Co., 1938) xv.

But whereas others were content to outline Augustine's model of Trinitatian reading, Gene had the insight to recognize that, five centuries after Augustine's death, his model became a powerful impetus for the rise of vernacular literature. At first hesitantly, then with increasing finesse and self-confidence, vernacular poets, Gene showed, shaped Augustine's theory of comparative reading of divergent texts into a poetics of vernacular literature. For Gene, it was never a question of a simple adaptation of Augustinian poetics to vernacular literature. The influence was much subtler, involving a profound understanding of the saint's theories of signs and/as language.

Gene's books, particularly his masterful *Mervelous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages*, pay Augustine the homage of dialectical confrontation with contemporary, poststructuralist critical theory. The acuity with which he perceived the close ties between Augustine's sign theory, literary representation, and the development of a new kind of Christian subject specific to the historical context of twelfth-, thirteenth-, and fourteenth-century literary innovation (particularly in France, England, and Italy) is no accident. It reflects his recognition that medieval theories of language and logic, beginning with Augustine, had much in common with semiotic theory and the linguistic turn of the second half of the twentieth century. An axiom of Gene's scholarship was not simply to demonstrate the vital link between medieval thought and poststructural theory, but to do so in a way that contributed new insights to the evolution of history and literature in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Each of his books is special in a different way. Each one strikes out into uncharted territory, and it does so with tools, concepts, and texts we thought were familiar, we thought we knew, and above all we thought existed in separate pigeonholes; but somehow with Gene at the helm, landmarks fell away, or rather morphed into something more fluid, deeper, more nuanced…and above all more exciting.

Before the publication of *Reading the "Song of Roland"*, for example, many scholars analyzed the Old French epic from rather rigid historical categories reflecting preconceptions about *chansons de geste*. Without ever letting us forget that the *Roland* was a medieval poem first

and foremost, Gene demonstrated the philosophical and psychological essence of Roland's character in ways that readers of Freud, Sartre, or Crane's *Red Badge of Courage* could recognize. That was Gene Vance's special talent: he was a master of bringing difficult topics and people into fruitful conversation. He would have loved to debate with Augustine, but failing that, he filled his writings with convergences: Augustine with Derrida, Plotinus with Foucault, Iser with Aquinas, and so on.

No small measure of Gene Vance's ambition—and infectious optimism—was his determination to pursue the influence of late classical rhetoric and sign theory on a European scale (France, Italy, England, Germany) and on into the Renaissance as well. Compared with his contemporaries, Eugene Vance was protean, and if one considers his prowess as skier, sailor, pilot, and fisherman, even *proteiform*. In this light, let me close these reflections with his own definition of the term, "protean," a definition that, *mutatis mutandis*, captures the luminescent aura of Gene Vance's capacity to inspire "readers to release the forces that are within them":

> In the Renaissance, Proteus was the god of translation, not of translation as servile mimesis, but translation as positive difference. Just as the Greeks once had to be translated into Latin, so now the Latins had to be rendered in the vernacular if our affections are to be fully released in meaningful historical action. Translation that is servile, literal, and overconstrained will deny those affections, translation that is truly eloquent will move its readers to release the forces that are within them.[2]

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[2] Eugene Vance, *Mervelous Signals: Poetics and Sign Theory in the Middle Ages* (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1986) 350.