

University of California: In Memoriam, 1997

John Halverson, Literature; Linguistics: Santa Cruz



1928-1997

Professor of English and Comparative Literature, Emeritus

Born on November 16, 1928 and raised in Iowa, John Halverson died of liver cancer in his Santa Cruz home on March 28, 1997. A few days before his death he decided to write his own obituary for the local newspaper ("people don't know how to write obituaries any more," he told me) and to send a farewell "note" to his friends with the title "A Valediction Forbidding Mourning," an injunction which has yet to be heeded by them. The quoted words below are taken from either text.

John always felt that he had been "lucky in many respects, especially in good timing." "A three-year stint in a peacetime army" allowed him to escape the Korean War. "The wonderful GI Bill" put an end to his dabbling with a possible career as a trombone player and sent him to the University of Denver (1949-51), where he earned a B.A. in the humanities, a harbinger of his rich and diverse accomplishments as a humanist. From the University of Columbia (1951-52) John received a master's degree in philosophy, an experience which would forever keep his mind engrossed in the abstruse and unresolved quandaries of human existence. At Berkeley (1953-61) John earned a Ph.D. in English language and literature.

John taught Subject A at Berkeley and English at Princeton University (1961-65). His 1965 book, *The Principles of Writing*, 1965, and early articles ("Stress, Pitch and Juncture" and "Methods in English Teaching") were obviously related to his experience in the classroom. Other articles of the early sixties focused on some of his life-long literary preferences, Conrad, Melville, Mark Twain.

In 1965 John received the first of two Fulbright Lectureships in Sri Lanka (1965-66 and 1968-69) where his interest in religious studies

and cultural anthropology led to some publications on exorcism in Sinhalese Buddhism, the dancing healers of Ceylon, Ceylon English, the short story in Ceylon, and religious and social development in Sinhalese Buddhism. Until the end of his life John supported some poor Sri Lankan families and sponsored the U.S. education of one Sri Lankan youth.

"Good timing" brought John to UCSC in 1966 where he was part of the original faculty of Stevenson College and a co-founder of the Stevenson Core Course. In every respect John's professional life blossomed at Santa Cruz: he was twice the chair of Committee on Undergraduate Courses and Curriculum (1971-72, 1980-82), twice the chair of the Literature Department (1971-73, 1977-78), twice the chair of the Language Personnel Committee (1988-89, 1990-91), and once the chair of the Linguistics Department (1975-77). In all these positions, as he himself modestly wrote, "he was especially valued in the university community for his common sense and integrity."

The interdisciplinary character of the college fellowship was the ideal setting for a mind which knew no boundaries in the exploration of every cultural manifestation of the human spirit, "from ancient Greek and medieval and modern English literature to Buddhism and Christianity and linguistics, psychology and Paleolithic art." John always thought that his job at UCSC (where he taught for 31 years) was simply "the best" because here "he was given considerable freedom to do the things [he] wanted to do, some of them rather odd." By "rather odd" things John evidently meant the freedom to do research beyond a narrowly defined field of expertise, which in his case was Chaucer (he published a critical edition of *The Canterbury Tales* in 1971), *Beowulf* (the topic of several articles), and Old English (which he taught for years).

John's freedom to explore "rather odd things!" took him in several directions. In the 1970s he published a fascinating article on "Right Wing Rhetoric" and a short piece on "Animal Categories and Terms of Abuse." In the 1980s and after several trips to Lascaux and Altamira, John became mesmerized by the study of Paleolithic art and wrote abundantly about it in *Current Anthropology* and in *Rock Art Research*. His claim that Paleolithic Art was just "art for art's sake" became the subject of an intense and learned controversy. In the 1990s John's publications took a decidedly philosophical turn. In 1997 he published three articles on "the implosion of the Literacy Theory" and established a critical dialogue with some of its exponents

(Goody, Olson, Havelock). The paintings of the Paleolithic became invitations to study "The Archeology of Perception" and the "Perceptual Foundations" of art, the relation between art and cognition. In 1997 John published "a short biography of Plato" and an insightful comparison between "Plato's Republic and ours." From 1985 to 1991 he taught a course on the New Testament "as literature" which was admired by some students and criticized by others. His final and most ambitious work was an unfinished (and not yet published) book fittingly entitled *Towards a History of the Mind*, a collection of essays exploring the emergence of rationality in prehistoric humanity and tracking some of its most creative moments through history.

When death ("the distinguished thing" in the words of Henry James) knocked on John's door at the age of 69, he found himself with "neither depression nor anxiety" and "all unpleasant things considered, in pretty good spirits, although not exactly jolly." Just before his illness he "had been feeling a certain amount of ennui and a decreased tolerance for the world's follies, stupidities, hypocrisies, and crimes." For several months John knew that "his time had come, a deeply intuited knowledge, an ineluctable message from both body and mind." He died surrounded by some of his friends, of whom he had many, most of them life-long friends. He died free from any illusion and any religious terror, and left the bulk of his estate to a UCSC scholarship for needy students.

Carlos G. Norena

And from SFGate:

A private wake has been held in Santa Cruz for Professor [John Halverson](#), an innovative English teacher, who died March 28 after an illness of several months. He was 69. Born and raised in Iowa, Dr. Halverson served in the Air Force for three years, after which he attended the [University of Denver](#), where he earned a bachelor's degree in humanities; [Columbia University](#), where he earned a master's in philosophy, and the [University of California at Berkeley](#), for a master's degree and doctorate in English language and literature. Professor Halverson taught at [Princeton University](#) for four years, and was twice a Fulbright lecturer in Sri Lanka. In 1966, he accepted a position at UC Santa Cruz, where he taught in the English department until his retirement in 1993.

He was a member of the original faculty of [Adlai E. Stevenson College](#), co-founding the college's unique core course in the humanities, philosophy and social sciences. Professor Halverson travelled widely and his scholarly interests were broad-based -- including Greek, medieval and modern English literature; Buddhism and Christianity; orality and literacy; linguistics, prehistory and paleolithic art -- interests that were encompassed in his lectures and resulted