

Memorial Minute for Robert T. Petersson
Read by Jefferson Hunter, Faculty Meeting November 30, 2011

Robert Torsten Petersson, Professor of English Language and Literature Emeritus, died in Northampton on April 8, 2011. A native Californian, Bob received his AB, in classics and with honors, from the University of California, Berkeley, in 1942, and then proceeded to Princeton, where three years later he received the PhD—even in that simpler era, a remarkably rapid progress to the doctorate. After teaching stints at Yale and the University of Chicago, he came to Smith in 1952 and progressed steadily through the ranks, being named full professor in 1964. Bob retired in 1985, a year in which he was also nominated for a Senior Teaching Award—one of several accolades he received for his classroom work.

An undergraduate commenting on Bob as a teacher said that “his enthusiasm and personality add a charm to the courses which I found invaluable.” The two courses she refers to were Shakespeare, and a course with the winningly old-fashioned title “The Tragic Muses,” and between them they sum up Bob’s intellectual interests. On one hand, he was a specialist in the English Renaissance, teaching and writing on Shakespeare and other figures of the period. His first book was on Sir Kenelm Digby, the seventeenth-century courtier, diplomat, astrologer, alchemist, privateer, and cookbook author; later, for the Yale Shakespeare Series, Bob edited *Richard II*. On the other hand, “The Tragic Muses,” a course beginning with Sophocles and ending with Fellini, maps out the extent of his interests elsewhere. He read widely and saw films widely, and indeed was one of the first members of the English Department to teach film, helping to devise a colloquium called “Film and Literature” as early as 1981. I remark with some astonishment that in that year he not only taught the new colloquium but five other courses besides, plus a special studies. There were giants on earth in those days.

Bob was multidisciplinary well before multidisciplinary became an established mode in academe, and his main monument in this area is the study funded by a Guggenheim Fellowship and published in 1970, *The Art of Ecstasy: Teresa, Bellini, and Crashaw*. This book ranges widely through three languages to a consideration of ecstatic devotion in Saint Teresa’s autobiography, in Bellini’s Cornaro Chapel in Rome, with its famous statue of the saint, and in the English poet Richard Crashaw’s “Hymn” to Teresa. It is an ambitious, learned, and lucidly written work which received the National Catholic Book Award in 1971.

In a *Smith Alumnae Magazine* article noting his retirement, Bob was praised by a colleague for his readiness to welcome newcomers to the community. This is something I can testify to myself—his friendliness to a new junior colleague, his helpfulness during my own early forays into film studies. In the art of hospitality, an area of life no less important but perhaps less written about than the art of ecstasy, Bob was very ably seconded by his wife Suzy, Suzanne Straub, Smith class of ’44. Together they made their home into a place where newcomers, art, literature, and the discussion of local politics were all welcomed.

Bob is survived by Suzy, their four children, and eight grandchildren. The family invites those who knew Bob to contribute, if they wish, to donating a bench in Bob’s memory at Look Park, a place where he loved to walk.