



Wolfgang Holdheim

August 4, 1926 – November 12, 2016

Born in Berlin, Wolfgang Holdheim relocated with his family to Amsterdam in 1939; his father, arrested there and transported to a Dutch concentration camp, subsequently perished at Auschwitz. After the end of World War II, Wolfgang immigrated to the United States to earn his B.A. in Philosophy and M.A. in French Literature at the University of California, Los Angeles.

With characteristic self-effacement he described his intellectual formation as consisting of a post-war fascination with sociology, a headlong flight into history, a transplantation into philosophy, and a disenchantment with strictly limited approaches to disciplinary boundaries enforced by academic departments. As a self-confirmed maverick, he veered toward the study of literature, but rejected concentrating upon its English variety because of his German accent, refused to take up its German variety because he already knew the language and was not totally unfamiliar with its major works, and embarked upon its French variety because he believed himself almost totally ignorant of it before starting graduate study.

In 1956 he completed his Ph.D. in Romance Studies at Yale University, where he studied under the direction of Erich Auerbach and Henri Peyre, with an interdisciplinary dissertation on the works of Friedrich Nietzsche and André Gide. His early teaching appointments were at Ohio State University, Brandeis University, and Washington University. During those years he published a monograph on the writing of Benjamin Constant (1961); an English translation of Max Scheler's *Ressentiment* (1965, reprinted 1972, and 1994); a pioneering study of literary theory and comparative literary history laconically titled *Theory and Practice of the Novel: A Study on André Gide* (1968); and a ground-breaking correlation of approaches to the study of law and literature, *Der Justizirrtum als literarische Problematik* ("Judicial Error as Literary Theme," 1969).

Wolfgang came to Cornell University in 1969 to chair the newly instituted department of Comparative Literature as the Frederick J. Whiton Professor of Comparative Literature and Romance Studies. Already honored with a Guggenheim Fellowship before his arrival, he received other prestigious awards that included fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation. During these years Wolfgang published a detailed account of nineteenth-century historical fiction titled *Die Suche nach dem Epos* ("The Search for Epic," 1978) and a theoretical work on *The Hermeneutic Mode: Essays on Time in Literature and Literary Theory* (1984). No less important than these full-length books is a stream of essays, articles, and book chapters that appeared in distinguished publications on topics of philosophical phenomenology, literary hermeneutics, and the academic rigor of comparative literary study.

Upon retiring from Cornell in 1990, Wolfgang moved with his wife, Evelyn "Ava" (née Stanislawski), to Boca Raton, Florida. In 2008 he was predeceased by Ava after fifty-five years of marriage. They are survived by their daughter Sylvia Holdheim, Esq., of Sandia Park, New Mexico; their son Robert Holdheim of Hong Kong, China; and two grandsons, Sachin Holdheim and Saurin Holdheim. Despite the horrors of war that Wolfgang encountered at an early age, he lived a complete and happy life. Ever again with self-effacing irony he described his career as one of some import without undue concessions to modishness or any compromises on matters of intellectual principle. One can hardly ask for more. Having struggled for years with various health problems, he passed away peacefully in Reston, Virginia, at the age of 90.

Written by William J. Kennedy (Chair), Calum MacNeill Carmichael and Debra Ann Castillo