

Rita Balkey Oleyar
1922-1996

PROFESSOR OF ENGLISH AND COMPARATIVE LITERATURES, EMERITUS

B.A., Seton Hall College; M.A., California State University Fullerton; Ph.D., English,
University of California, Irvine, December 14, 1968
California State University, Fullerton From September 1, 1966 To July 1, 1979
Birth: December 16, 1922; Death: November 17, 1996

At first acquaintance, Rita Oleyar shone forth as outstanding in intellect and character. In graduate classes she was incisive and eloquent; in written research she was analytic, thorough, imaginative and insightful. After her M.A. with us, she earned the first Ph.D. granted by U.C. Irvine with a brilliant thesis that foreshadowed much of her subsequent teaching, "The Biblical Wilderness Motif in Vaughan, Herbert, and Milton." She published 15 articles and four books. During her fourteen years on our staff she taught with distinction eight upper-division courses: The Bible as Literature, Classical Mythology, Advanced English Grammar, Milton, Myths of Creation and Fall, Images of Jesus, and two graduate seminars, The Metaphysical Poets and Biblical Influences in World Literature.

Rita as a child displayed the character and courage, which led her in midlife to success in college teaching and writing. Her father, like millions of other Americans in the Depression, was unemployed and away from home seeking work and her mother was desperately ill. Her daughter Marjorie recounts, "Rita, her twin sister, Ruth, and little brother, Bobby, were taken to live in St. Joseph's Orphanage in 1931...with kind but strict nuns in charge. Rita retained only good memories of this experience." The three children remained essentially wards of the social welfare system of the Pittsburgh area until adulthood. Four years later, when Rita and the other two children had been sent home from St. Joseph's which had been closed, she became the effective head of the little family, caring also for her ailing mother. "Rita kept the fire going, did the cooking and cleaning, skipped school." Their current social worker "did not have the heart to take them away again by force and left the decision to Rita." Rita later, in a tone reflecting not self pity or regret but pride in her ability to cope with decisions and situations way beyond what most 13-year olds ever have to face, reported, "One snowy February morning when coal and food ran out I simply bundled us up and walked across the 22nd Street Bridge to the Juvenile Court and gave ourselves up." For children to bear such adult problems does have its lurking costs, however. In 1994, nearly 60 years later, she wrote to Bobby, "I used to feel guilt about it, but somehow sensed that (their mother) would never take charge of her life." While the children were living with their first and most beloved of their foster parents, the Wagners, their mother died of pulmonary complications.

Able at last to concentrate on her education, Rita enjoyed great success, graduating from Oliver High School, Pittsburgh, in 1940 with Highest Honors and likewise from Seton Hill College, (Greensburg, Pa.), in 1945.

In early adulthood, after her marriage in 1946, she concentrated on providing the loving, supportive home that fortune had denied her. Her four daughters, Rebecca (1947), Jane (1949), Margie (1952), Heidi (1958), report nurtured and loved childhoods,

rich with books, music, and good food. She and the girls enjoyed sewing as a productive hobby and all played piano.

Finally, when the girls were more self-sufficient, she decided to return to college and reenter scholarship in literature with the writing that goes along. She had taught in high school and decided that the acme of enjoyable careers would be professoring. Her intelligence, resolve, and energy assured her success.

In the midst of an outstanding career, Rita was struck down by Cushing's syndrome, an adrenal malady with widespread serious consequences. Her doctors recommended disability retirement in 1979. From that day until her death, her life was full of writing projects of all sorts—novels, short stories, autobiographical vignettes, and articles. Becky writes, "My mother's courage through twenty years of physical pain and discomfort will be with me always as a true model of an indomitable spirit enduring life's challenges and adversities...on one occasion, (riding cross-country on a plane she had not only captured her four year old grandson with the reading of a Dr. Seuss book, but an entire tour load of Japanese who...left their seats to come closer and listen." A month before her death, she wrote to Margie with enthusiasm that an editor liked a manuscript she was working on. "I may resurrect my Viking book. Or start a woman's book myself, while waiting to hear on my mystery." The expectations and mental energy of youth persisted in a woman soon to surrender her life after years of struggle.

Heidi, with whom she spent her last months, says of her, "In the end Mom was able to pay all her bills and provide for herself. I know she wanted that.... She was able to find happiness in the little things around the house, the birds outside and especially Shannon (her granddaughter), who is so like Mom...happy, pleasant, loving and always helpful and cheerful."

Rita Oleyar rests as an emblem of an important major accomplishment of the 20th Century—the autonomous woman, who enjoys great accomplishment in childhood and adolescence, in parenthood, and in her profession. Her family and colleagues will miss her greatly but will always cherish the inspiration of having known her.

Submitted by

Orrington C. Ramsay

Professor of English, Emeritus

Greatly assisted by Becky, Jane, Marjorie, and Heidi

July 16, 1997