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Remarks on the retirement of Melvin Woody, Professor of Philosophy, May 20, 2005

Melvin Woody is retiring after two score and two years of service, having arrived at the College in 1963, when the formidable Susanne Langer was putting her indelible stamp on the Philosophy Department. Mel's undergraduate and graduate career at Yale was itself informed by the legacy of Langer's teacher, Ernst Cassirer. To this day, Mel keeps alive the tradition of Cassirer and Langer, refugees who attempted to rescue philosophy from the shipwreck of Nazi irrationalism.

Mel himself is a refugee of sorts. He credits his Yale education with liberating him from a family past in Missouri scarred by the legacy of slave-owning rooted in racism, an evil made all the worse by its alliance with religious fervor. Mel's liberal arts education lived up to its vocation by showing him the possibilities of a liberal temper informed by wide, interdisciplinary learning.

Hard though it is to believe, Mel served in the U.S. Army in 1957-8, though he admits that while stationed in Karlsruhe, Germany, he commuted to evening seminars in Heidelberg taught by the eminent philosophers, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Dieter Henrich. Given current "recruitment challenges," please don't mention this to the U.S. government lest they use Mel's retirement as a pretext for redeploying him to Baghdad!

When he first began teaching, the history of philosophy was his focus, Hegel his love. He describes how his habit of writing out a complete lecture for each of his classes, even small seminars, grew out of the days when the College wasn't yet co-ed and the young women wouldn't speak in his class, though many would write brilliant papers after reading seven books on their topic in the library, a rare feat today in the era of the Internet.

No doubt their papers owed much to the unparalleled attention Mel pays to student writing. With every paper they complete, Mel invites his students to hand in a sheet labeled "Self-critique," which asks the student whether this paper represents the best of their writing and, if not, why not. The answers typically range from "Well, Hegel is really hard to understand, you know" to "I have a learning disability, especially for philosophy" and now the latest, "I don't think it's so bad given that my computer crashed, and I had to reconstruct my paper in an hour." Though Mel is uncompromising in his assessment of students' ideas, he's charitable in appreciating the circumstances that make it hard for them to meet his high expectations. Still, Mel is proud to be an enemy of grade inflation, insisting that "the flawless exegesis of a text earns you a solid C" because the real task of philosophy is independent, critical thinking.

Those with the fortitude to face the fire concur that no professor has improved their writing and opened their minds to the richness of ideas more than Mel Woody. Scores of former students have stayed in close touch with him over the years, testament to the seriousness with which he took their thoughts at a formative moment in their lives.

For me, a member of the newer generation in the Philosophy Department, what's most inspiring about Mel's career is the way he's kept growing through the decades. In the 1980's, he developed a Philosophy of Law course after studying at the Yale Law School on a Lilly Fellowship. In the 1990's his interests, enhanced by NEH seminars at Berkeley and Cornell, turned to psychiatry and its bearing on the philosophy of mind. And at the turn of the millennium, he took the opportunity to teach in the College's SATA program in Athens, and developed a new course on tragedy and philosophy.

During this fertile period in the last third of his career, Mel has proven himself a wholly engaged and devoted citizen of the profession, serving twice on the Executive Council of the Hegel Society of America, twice as Program Chair for the Metaphysical Society of America, and currently on the Executive Board of the Association for the Advancement of Philosophy and Psychiatry, a group he helped to found and whose meeting he is now attending, explaining his absence tonight.

And finally Mel's ever-renewable energy for philosophy moved him in 1998 to publish a wholly revised version of what is possibly the most seasoned outgrowth of a doctoral dissertation ever written: the wonderful book, *Freedom's Embrace*.

Speaking of embrace, I'd be remiss not to mention how love has helped to transform Mel's life in the very period when his work has proven so fertile. Mel met Nissa Simon when both of them were in college – she at Barnard, he at Yale – in a summer course on Modern Drama at Columbia. They were smitten, but Mel was off to Edinburgh for a year abroad, and in the meantime, each met others whom they eventually married. Nissa raised a family in New Haven, but when both of their marriages fell apart, they reconnected in the early 1980's and are now genuine lovebirds returned to the nest. Mel is wholly a member of a family he never had.

They split their time between New Haven and Mel's 1765 farmhouse in Old Lyme where Mel co-founded the Pleasant Valley Association to keep developers from turning the mountain overlooking the valley's meadow into a gravel pit. Starting in 1990, the gravel company expected the citizens to wear down, but Mel would have no part of it and has to this day successfully fended off the Tomasso Company and its minions.

Despite Mel's accomplishments on so many fronts, I don't think anyone who knows him would deny that he fits the image of the absent-minded professor. This image comes to us from Thales, sometimes called "the first philosopher," who is reported to have fallen into a well because he was so intent on stargazing. Several years ago when the Metaphysical Society was holding its annual meeting at Dickinson College, Mel drove six hours to Carlisle, PA only to discover that he'd arrived a week early. Typical of Mel's resilient spirit, he remarks in retrospect, "It was OK; I turned around, headed to New York and saw a fabulous performance by the Paul Taylor Dance Company. It was a great evening."

Mel Woody sees how the glass is half-full, and makes the best of the situation. And he brings this same generosity of spirit to others. He once told me that he considers himself a "procedural Platonist," treating all people as if they aspire to achieve the common good by their best lights, until proven otherwise. Mel has nourished generations of our students and colleagues by passing on to us what he received from his own teachers: a sense that the Western philosophical tradition, in spite of its failures, can help us realize the best in ourselves.