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## Michel Benamou (1929–1978)

by *Melvin J. Friedman*

We talk very loosely these days about international reputations. Michel Benamou emphatically had one. He and his work were known on both sides of the Atlantic. His reputation extended as far as Australia. A casual mention of his name at the University of Aix-en-Provence, at the University of Konstanz, at the University of East Anglia, at the University of Antwerp, or at the University of Sydney would elicit more than the usual polite response; it would set off a gathering of superlatives about a very special human being who had written two of the best books on Wallace Stevens (significantly, one in English and one in French), distinguished essays on the Symbolists and the surrealists, and challenging studies about the Franco-American literary experience. From his early reviews in *Etudes Anglaises* through his recent brilliant pieces on displacement and marginality one sees a restless sensibility at work—a mind possessed of uncommon vitality and commitment.

While most scholars increasingly narrow their optics as they grow older, he enlarged his. His gestures as a mature critic represent compellingly what Wallace Stevens meant by “the imagination’s new beginning.” In the last few years Michel Benamou began experimenting with the techniques of structuralism, semiotics, and ethnopoetics. He used these methods to clarify his vision, to expand his focus—so that his domain was no longer just literature and the arts but the entire cultural scene.

Michel, it should be noted, was the least selfish of scholars. His vast generosity of spirit never permitted him to restrict his discoveries and intuitions to the hermetic pages of professional journals—although he frequently graced the pages of such prestigious publications as *La Nouvelle Revue Française*, *The Romanic Review*, *Critique*, *Comparative Literature*, *The French Review*, *Yale French Studies*, *ELH*, and *Contemporary Literature*. He wanted to reach large numbers of people in the community as well as in the university. He managed this triumphantly during the four years he served as director of the Center for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Never have job and person occupying it seemed so ideally mated. Michel Benamou brought immediate distinction to this center and made it the prototype for all undertakings of its kind. He gently persuaded people like Eugène Ionesco, Alain Robbe-Grillet, John Cage, Samuel R. Delany, Umberto Eco, and Jerome Rothenberg to pass extended periods on the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee campus and involve themselves in the workings of the center. Operating the center was always a joint effort which Michel

shared with a series of honored guests, with colleagues, with students, and with the Milwaukee community.

Michel's vitality was something widely known. At the May 1978 meeting of the Executive Council of the Modern Language Association of America his name was frequently invoked. There was apparently considerable agreement that he was among the handful of most active people in the profession of language and literature study in this country. He was invited to join the distinguished committee which initiates programs for MLA meetings. Earlier in this year he had been nominated for the Executive Council itself.

Michel Benamou's commitment to the profession was also evident in his position as assistant editor for pedagogy of *The French Review* – a journal to which he contributed articles and reviews over the years. One should mention, among other things, his long-time editorial involvement with *Teaching Language Through Literature* and his role as consultant to HEW and NEA.

Michel Benamou's recognition was clearly not limited to any single campus. (He spent long periods at Michigan, Dartmouth, the University of California, San Diego, and the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, but his activities were never in any sense restricted to these academic settings.) He was internationally known and esteemed. "He became his admirers," as Auden once said of Yeats.

This overview of a career falls embarrassingly short. Let me echo de Gaulle's now famous remark on first meeting Malraux: "Enfin, voilà un homme!" It applies well here.

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