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**TWO TRIBUTES GIVEN BY  
EDWARD HUGHES AND LAURA MARCUS  
IN MEMORY OF**

**MICHAEL SHERINGHAM**

PhD, FBA

Commandeur, Ordre des Palmes Académiques

**2 June 1948 – 21 January 2016**

Emeritus Fellow of All Souls, 2015-2016, Fellow, 2004-2015

Marshal Foch Professor of French Literature, University of Oxford, 2004-2015

Professor of French, Royal Holloway, University of London, 1995-2004

Lecturer, and later Professor of French Literature, University of Kent at Canterbury, 1974-1995

Lecturer in French, New University of Ulster (now Ulster University), 1973-1974

Saturday, 1 October at 2.30 p.m.

## Professor Edward Hughes

I want to begin by thanking Cilla and thanking the Warden for their kind invitation to pay tribute today to Michael, to Micky. There is so much to be remembering about him and so much to be holding dear. The tributes that have been paid to him since the time of his death have rightly spelt out how pivotal a figure he was in the field in which he worked but have also pointed to the fondness and loyalty that he inspired in those who had the good fortune to know and work with him.

When Micky was elected a fellow of All Souls, he embraced the life of the College with enthusiasm and energy, in the same way that he enjoyed immensely his work as the Marshall Foch Professor of French Literature here in the University.

In his book *French Autobiography* he reflected wisely about the subjects whose very varied lives he was studying: 'Here are real men and women confronting (and evading) in a host of different ways, the intractable realities of their lives'. The ambitiousness of that work was a mark of his capacity to embark on big projects that would take time but would also stand the test of time, making a lasting impact. The name Sheringham has become a reference point for critics working in the field of life-writing. Likewise in work on the everyday.

As we know, Micky read with relish. He once encouraged me to go back to Chateaubriand's *Mémoires* but said that I should read it in the Gallimard paperback edition as it felt so much better, it was a more intimate experience than handling the paper used in the Pléiade edition. But he had bigger concerns too. In his *French Autobiography*, he reflected on 'the "empty" miracle of writing'. Micky was thus keenly aware of the idea of writing as power but also as emptiness.

In addition to his exceptional intellectual ability, his generosity and attentiveness as a host was a gift that so many of us enjoyed. And I also of course remember the generosity and warm welcome that he and Cilla and their family showed to their guests in their homes in Canterbury and Oxford.

Micky was curious about others and their lives, their work, their ideas. He engaged generously in discussions about *their* projects. As a mentor of academic colleagues and as a supervisor of research students, he would listen attentively to them as they set out their projects before playing the ideas back to them, often from a new angle or in ways that offered greater cohesiveness, clarity and composure. That some of Micky's former PhD students, themselves now established academics in other countries, should have travelled to be present here today says much about the loyalty and gratitude that he inspired.

There are publications in the pipeline, reflecting both new work by Micky and also tributes to him and I would just like to give brief details of these. Legenda will be publishing two books in the spring of 2017. The first of these is a festschrift for Micky entitled *The Made and the Found, Poetry and Prose for Michael Sheringham*, edited by Emily McLaughlin and Patrick McGuinness: the book will consist of pieces of creative writing with contributions by Marina Warner, Patrick McGuinness, Jacques Réda, Yves Bonnefoy, Jacques Roubaud and Ann Smock, among others. The second Legenda volume is a collection of Michael's previously published writings on poetry. That book will be entitled *Perpetual Motion: Studies in French Poetry from Surrealism to the Postmodern* and will be edited by Patrick McGuinness and Priscilla Sheringham. In addition to these, Oxford University Press will be publishing his last book, *The Afterlives of Pierre Rivière: Foucault and the Archival Imaginary*, to be edited by Diana Knight and Johnnie Gratton. And finally, Liverpool University Press will be publishing a collection of papers from the conference held in Micky's honour last January here at the College and the book is being edited by Patrick Crowley and Shirley Jordan.

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In conversation with Micky, he once told me, with enthusiasm, about an undergraduate essay topic that one of his colleagues at Kent had set. I think (from memory) that it was about the poet Guillaume Apollinaire and the question ran something like this: 'What was Guillaume Apollinaire driving at?' Micky liked the, as it were, no-nonsense directness of the formulation, its slightly unconventional character; he

liked the invitation in the question to reflect on what the author's goal was. In the context of today's memorial, I have been asking myself: what was Michael Sheringham driving at? What was Micky attempting in his landmark books on French Autobiography and on theories and practices of the Everyday in French culture? What was he driving at in his influential work on contemporary French writing (he was so plugged into contemporary French culture and ideas and as we know he relished acquainting himself with new voices in French literature)?

Part of the answer to the question 'what was he driving at?' can be found, for me at least, listening to an interview that he gave on French radio on the appearance of the French translation of his book on the Everyday, *Traversées du quotidien: des surréalistes aux postmodernes* (Presses Universitaires de France, 2013). It can be difficult for us to listen now to that France-Culture interview and yet at the same time it shows us Micky at his persuasive best. One is immediately struck not just by his fluency in French, by the cadence in the delivery, by the attention he pays to his interlocutor, but also by the clarity of his reflection on the everyday, and by the skill with which he moves across a century and more of material in pursuit of a subject that is everywhere and yet also evasive.

Many of us will remember Micky at conferences, where, in addition to making highly influential interventions himself, he was again a keen listener to other participants.

He was affable, gregarious, inquisitive in the best sense, and engaged. Yet he was also at home in the more solitary work of writing and composition. Before giving his Inaugural Lecture at Royal Holloway – he was then Head of Department – he wrote to colleagues (this was in the days when you would get A5-size slips of paper in your pigeon hole) to say that he was 'going into hiding for a number of days in order to write the thing'.

But he was not a prisoner of his study. I was reminded of that on looking back through some old postcards of places he had enjoyed visiting: Morocco (might this be paradise, he wondered), Cape Town, California... but also places much closer to home. On Monday mornings

at Royal Holloway, he would sometimes speak about walks he had enjoyed in East Kent at the weekend. I was often struck by how sensitive he was to landscape.

On one occasion, he and Cilla had been on holiday on the Norfolk coast, in the small town of Sheringham. I wasn't aware of this and a few days later was in the French departmental office at Royal Holloway where I noticed a large box of sweets on the table. I couldn't help but see on the top of the box, in large letters, the words: FUDGE FROM SHERINGHAM. I must have looked slightly non-plussed when at that moment I happened to look up and there, across the room, I could see Micky, standing with a broad, mischievous smile on his face. We all remember his lively sense of humour and the quickness of his wit.

In the conversations about French literature that I had the *great* fortune to enjoy with Micky over the years, there was one author whose name almost invariably came up, that of the poet Charles Baudelaire. Baudelaire's prose poems were particular favourites of Micky's and indeed in a discussion I had with him here at the College a couple of years ago, he placed the *Petits poèmes en prose* in his Top Ten of French literary texts. As we see in his book on *Everyday Life*, he explores the links between Baudelaire as the poet of modernity and what followed in the twentieth century. Micky writes there: 'Baudelaire urged the artist to [see how] the eternal and the transitory are fused'. He goes on to quote from Baudelaire: "'the marvellous envelops and sustains us like the atmosphere; but we do not see it'".

I will end by reading from the beginning of one of those prose poems, 'L'Horloge' [The Clock] in which Baudelaire contrasts two views of time: the one chronological, the menacing time of the clock which moves inexorably, taking us destructively with it; and the other time, a time of the imagination, a time indeed of the marvellous. As many here will know, in the poem, a Western missionary in China has no watch and thus no way of telling the time. A local boy comes to the rescue, helped by a cat. These opening lines from 'L'Horloge' I will read, then, by way of tribute to a friend and colleague who elegantly showed us, through his work and conversation and teaching, what the study of literature and ideas and the imagination could mean:

## L'Horloge

Les Chinois voient l'heure dans l'œil des chats.

Un jour un missionnaire, se promenant dans la banlieue de Nankin, s'aperçut qu'il avait oublié sa montre, et demanda à un petit garçon quelle heure il était.

Le gamin du céleste Empire hésita d'abord; puis, se ravisant, il répondit: 'Je vais vous le dire'. Peu d'instant après, il reparut, tenant dans ses bras un fort gros chat, et le regardant, comme on dit, dans le blanc des yeux, il affirma sans hésiter: 'Il n'est pas encore tout à fait midi.' Ce qui était vrai.

## Professor Laura Marcus

I came to know Micky Sheringham when I was starting my PhD at the University of Kent, where he was then Lecturer in French, having studied there, along with Cilla, for his BA and then postgraduate work. It was a well-established new university by the time I arrived, but I recall Micky telling me of the somewhat improvised conditions in the first years of its foundation, and of the excitement – which stayed with him – of being taught and then of teaching with colleagues across and between different disciplines – in particular, philosophy, literatures and art history.

I was first introduced to Micky by my supervisor, Professor David Ellis, because my thesis (in the English Literature department) was on autobiography: Micky was working on autobiography in the French tradition. We met often to talk about our topics, and he was the most generous and inspiring intellectual guide and companion.

Micky's research in these years culminated in his brilliant book, *French Autobiography: Devices and Desires* (published by Oxford University Press in 1993). This compendious study moves from Rousseau and confession through to questions of memory in the work of writers including Roland Barthes and Georges Perec. It is characterized by Micky's habitual blend of conceptual precision with imaginative reach. It offers the most illuminating ways of approaching the questions that perplex anyone who works in this field – how do we define the differences between autobiography and fiction? What motivates someone to write the story of their life? Who is the intended, or imagined, audience for an autobiography? What is the relationship between the writing of autobiography and the work of memory?

These are not narrowly literary questions, but reach out to the most fundamental issues of identity and selfhood, as these lines from the book's discussion of Rousseau suggest:

'Fixity [in Rousseau] arrives less in terms of a desired self-image ... than in the way an individual's passage through time is apprehended both as a process of constant adjustment, mutation, malleability to external

impressions and pressures, *and* as a constant circling around, and repetition of, basic structural patterns, fashioned in early experience, which recur at different points in the spiral of existence’.

We make our lives, we might say, at the same time as they make us. The terms of becoming and of being also lie at the heart of the existentialist autobiography which Micky explores so wonderfully in the book – which is concerned above all with autobiography, and life, not as a product but as a process. ‘Process’ and ‘project’ are, indeed, the keynotes, or touchstones, of so much of Micky’s work.

I kept in touch with Micky (who was the internal examiner for my thesis) after I’d left Kent and he was always extremely generous in asking me back to participate in and contribute to events he was organizing – then and later when he became Professor of French at Royal Holloway, University of London. Looking back, there seem to have been an extraordinary number of such events – talks, conferences, symposia – organized or co-organized by Micky over the years. I think it was Dominic Rabaté, in the obituary he wrote, (which pointed up the exceptional regard and affection in which Micky was held by literary scholars in France) who noted the happy ways in which he combined the disposition of the scholar, who must be capable of working in solitude for sustained periods, with great sociability and gregariousness. The events were further ways of making these two dispositions work in tandem, and they were immensely productive for us all. Micky’s superb book on *Everyday Life* comes out of this intense engagement and interest in all aspects of experience, ideas, people and things.

I recall many occasions over the years when I met up with Micky for dinner or a drink. He always made me laugh – I recall, for some reason, a long-ago account he gave of the ways in which, in Canterbury’s self-service greengrocer, he would invariably choose for himself fruit and vegetables of an ugliness or decrepitude which no shopkeeper would dare to select for a customer. And there were conversations which seemed to unfold like a never-ending story, one idea, discussion of a book or film, or anecdote (as well as news of his children Sam and Oli) leading on to another and then another, to be brought to a close only by

the sudden awareness of the imminent departure of last trains to our respective homes.

It was an immense pleasure to me when I joined him as a colleague at Oxford in 2010 and there were opportunities for shared projects and for the most convivial lunches and dinners, with both Micky and Cilla. Micky loved being at All Souls. He took great delight in its beauty and its traditions, but above all in the community he found here – a collegiality he also greatly valued in his many close friends and colleagues in Modern Languages at Oxford. He was in his element at Oxford's Maison Française, bringing together friends and colleagues for many wonderful activities and events. And throughout the years of his illness, he kept on researching and writing, so that there are further brilliant books to be published. These include his exploration of 'the archive' and the processes of historical reconstruction, with a particular focus on the work of Michel Foucault, and a collection of his numerous essays on modern French poetry and poetics.

In 2010, during a Leverhulme-funded year of research, Micky was awarded a fellowship at the Camargo Foundation in Cassis, Provence. That September I was at a conference along the coast in Aix en Provence, and we arranged that I would come to stay in Cassis for a few days, in a hotel very close to the Foundation. Micky and Cilla drove to collect me in Aix, where they had spent a year together as undergraduates – we went to take a look at the house they'd stayed in at that time. Then we drove to Cassis and the beautiful Camargo site, which overlooks the bay. They were, typically, completely at home there and with the other fellows.

When I left Cassis, I felt a little as if I'd been expelled from Paradise. So I'm going to leave us there – Micky, Cilla and me – having dinner on the terrace, talking – always talking – and looking out over the twilit sea.