

Dalai Brenes

January 8, 1907 — April 7, 1997

Dalai Brenes, Professor of Romance Studies, Emeritus, died peacefully in Amherst, New York, at the age of 90. He came to the United States in 1920 after early schooling in Costa Rica, where he was born in Heredia into a distinguished and culturally active family. His father, Roberto Brenes-Mesén, who held academic posts in this country, was a well-known poet and essayist. Dalai was predeceased by his wife, Eleanor, and their daughter, Udai Hoffberg; and he is survived by his grandchildren, Claudia and Kevin Hoffberg of Lafayette, California; and Eric Hoffberg of Rochester; and two great-grandchildren.

Dalai received his B.A. degree from Northwestern University in 1936 and an M.A. degree from the University of Chicago a year later. He then interrupted his education to take on teaching posts at Pennsylvania State College from 1938-40 and at the YMCA College of Chicago during the war years. One of the founding faculty of Roosevelt University in Chicago, he rose in its ranks and chaired the Department of Modern Languages from 1945-54, when, at the invitation of Morris Bishop, he came to Cornell as an Instructor and doctoral candidate. He completed the degree in 1957 with a dissertation on “The Sanity of Don Quijote: A Study in Cervantine Deception,” at which time he was appointed Assistant Professor. He was promoted to Associate Professor in 1962, to Professor in 1965, and he retired in 1972.

Dalai read and studied avidly all his life. He was never wanting for projects and spent many hours in remote Spanish archives, from which he sent back detailed and enthusiastic letters, and he would discourse at length about his innovative, even idiosyncratic, readings of classical texts. But, ever the perfectionist, he aired few of his ideas and discoveries in print. Early on, he collaborated on an article concerning manuscript problems in the *Song of Roland*, and published a piece on *Cervantes*. Later, he authored a pair of essays on Spanish language and culture. After his retirement, when one would often see him in Olin Library, he devoted himself to the complex and debated question of the authorship of the picaresque narrative, *Lazarillo de Tormes*, publishing some of his findings in *Hispania*, a journal widely circulated in the field. As recently as 1987 and 1992, two of his puzzle breakers appeared in a distinguished journal in Spain, the *Boletín de la Biblioteca de Menéndez Pelayo*.

Teaching was Dalai’s true passion, undergraduate teaching in particular, and it had for him an almost sacramental attraction. He held strong and unwavering views on how language should be taught, involved himself in university-wide committees on teacher preparation in foreign languages, and monitored teacher-trainees at Ithaca High

School. For many years, as the lone instructor in Spanish literature, he carried an overload in order to sustain the severely understaffed offerings, yet, approachable and generous to a fault, he maintained an open-door policy with students, devoting hours of conference time to them and much energy to program development. The core structure of the undergraduate major in Spanish still bears his stamp. He also helped to guide the occasional graduate student towards a successful career; those who worked with him recall him as a wise and worldly mentor. Once during the 1960s, he accompanied a student talent group on an adventurous Latin American tour designed to promote relations between the United States and its neighbors. He served several terms as acting chair of the department, but his most vigorous service contribution to Cornell was as a member of the Arts College Admissions Committee. He labored devotedly in this capacity for many years both before and after his retirement and, according to the testimony of the director of admissions, interviewed more applicants than any other faculty member.

Perhaps because he came late to the academy, Dalai always had an unorthodox take on things. Just as he never lost the lilt of his first language, he carried with him his upbringing in Central America and often clashed with a conformist world. There was a mystical side to Dalai, and conversations with him could be both rewarding and baffling. Whether the scene was Cornell faculty meetings or community school board sessions, he was outspoken and sometimes embattled, and from his home in Lansing he fired off long, thoughtful, and impassioned missives to the local newspapers, where his name regularly graced the editorial pages. Highly principled and a defender of academic freedom, he held committed political views and championed causes like freedom of speech and social justice.

Dalai was a gentle man and a gentleman. He embodied the remnants of a now bygone age of civility, and in the last years of his career he was witness to dramatic growth and to entirely new directions in his department at Cornell and in his discipline. He believed in courtesy, punctuality, attentiveness, personal responsibility, and other virtues whose diminished currency he deplored and which he saw fit to defend with patience but persistence. Although he would be able to indulge his bent for travel and photography, he retired from teaching with great reluctance at a moment when the institution, not the individual, still determined the timing of that final step. Yet he exited the academic stage with a record of humane traits—humility, honesty, elegance, rigor—that are to be prized even in the face of changing fashions in teaching and scholarship.

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