Herbert Dieckmann

May 22, 1906 — December 16, 1986

Herbert Dieckmann, the Avalon Professor of the Humanities emeritus, died in Oak Hill Manor Nursing Home in Ithaca at the age of eighty. He was an internationally acknowledged authority on eighteenth-century French literature and in particular the work of Denis Diderot. Born and educated in Europe, he was also a fervent, demanding, generous teacher, whose influence greatly contributed to the growth and increasing sophistication of Romance studies in America during and after the war. His spirited intellect, his learning, his devotion to the highest ideals of research and teaching, and his tireless giving of himself will long be remembered by at least three generations of his students and colleagues. We join his family in their sorrow and in honoring his memory.

Many cultivated European readers of the eighteenth century failed to recognize in Diderot a figure of the stature of Montesquieu, Voltaire, Rousseau, and Buffon. In large part that was because Diderot left so many of his singular and compelling works unpublished during his lifetime. On learning, at the age of sixty, that the publication of a new, unexpurgated edition of the *Encyclopédie* he had struggled to produce would soon be undertaken in Russia, Diderot wrote to a correspondent: "[Thus] I shall not die without having imprinted on the earth a few traces that time will not erase!... When I received your letter, I was busy preparing an edition of my complete works; I let the whole matter drop. I cannot undertake both projects at once; let us do the *Encyclopédie* and leave it to some good soul to gather up my scraps and tatters after my death." In the two centuries intervening, many good souls and many learned minds have labored to bring Diderot's works into print; none has contributed more to that achievement than Herbert Dieckmann, who devoted the major part of his long and productive scholarly career to the establishment and elucidation of Diderot's texts. At this writing his efforts are just coming to full fruition in the thirty-three-volume critical edition of Diderot produced by an international committee of some seventy scholars and now officially designated (after Dieckmann and his friend, the French general secretary of the editorial board) the Dieckmann-Varloot edition. Though Diderot was the most personal of writers, he gave precedence over his own works to the *Encyclopédie*, which he called "an establishment raised up for humanity." Herbert Dieckmann was a kindred spirit; he gave his life over, not to the display of his own uncommon mental powers (great erudition, philosophical acumen, wit, imagination, and a poetic awareness of evanescence), but to teaching others and to rescuing the work of Diderot from misunderstanding or oblivion.

Herbert Dieckmann was born in Duisburg, Germany, in North Rhineland. He was the son of Gottfried Dieckmann, a businessman not especially friendly to the life of the intellect, and his wife Amanda (née Wehrhahn-MacDonald) of Scots and Latin-American ancestry, known for her beauty and sense of fashion. Herbert learned English early from his Scots grandmother, and he attended a classical *Gymnasium* in Duisburg. When he was sixteen, his mother unexpectedly died in the course of routine surgery; his whole life was to be marked by that bereavement. He studied in Heidelberg and Munich (with the philosopher Karl Jaspers, among others), spent a year in Paris, and in 1930 finished his doctorate in Bonn under the direction of the great Romance philologist Ernst Robert Curtius.

In 1930 Herbert Dieckmann was married to Liselotte Neisser, a scholar of German philology. He was to have been appointed a *Privatdozent* in Bonn, but his wife's Jewish extraction, and his own well-known political activities on behalf of socialist and Evangelical Church groups, made it seem unwise to accept a post in what was rapidly becoming Hitler's Germany. The Dieckmanns spent the year 1933-34 in Rome under the sponsorship of the Dutch Emergency Council for Refugees, and then both took teaching positions at the Turkish State University in Istanbul. In Istanbul they had as friends and colleagues two illustrious representatives of the Germanic school of Romance philology, Erich Auerbach and Leo Spitzer, who were both, like the Dieckmanns, to end their careers in the United States.

In 1938 Herbert Dieckmann undertook the long trip to Baltimore to attend the annual Modern Language Association meetings and was offered an assistant professorship at Washington University in Saint Louis, where in due course he became professor and chairman of Romance languages. Though technically an "enemy alien" during the war, he gave instruction in Italian to American servicemen. He was naturalized in 1945. In 1948-49 he spent the year in France on a Fulbright fellowship and, in a chateau in Normandy, rediscovered the Fonds Vandeul, the largest and most important collection of Diderot manuscripts, which for many years had been lost to scholarly view.

In 1950 Dieckmann was appointed to Harvard, where he succeeded the legendary André Morize and eventually became the Smith Professor of French and Spanish, serving for several years as chairman of the Department of Romance Languages. In that same year he and his wife separated, and they were divorced a few years later. Liselotte Dieckmann continued to teach German at Washington University and remained a dear friend not only to Herbert but to his second wife Jane (nee Marsh), whom he married in 1959, and to the two children of that second marriage. In 1956-57 Dieckmann was invited to lecture on Diderot at the College de France (a signal honor for a foreign scholar of French literature). Those lectures provided the substance of his best-known book, modestly entitled

Cinq Leçons sur Diderot. At Harvard Dieckmann continued to demonstrate his uncompromising insistence on high principle and his devotion to teaching of an open, personal sort. He made noteworthy appointments that helped to revitalize Romance languages and took measures to rationalize and modernize the teaching of French literature.

To the delight of his friends in Ithaca, in 1966 Herbert Dieckmann accepted a professorship at Cornell, where he became the Avalon Professor of the Humanities the next year. He seemed to take special pleasure in the intellectual exchanges of a small, relatively tranquil, informal department that included younger colleagues (among them the three authors of these lines) whom he had known at Harvard. His teaching continued with undiminished (even renewed) vigor. On the cover of the April 1975 *Cornell Alumni News* a stunning photograph by Sol Goldberg shows Herbert teaching in a seminar room in Olin Library. Inevitably the scene appears somewhat posed (on the blackboard, in Herbert's energetic, expressive hand, one reads the title of the course rather than the more immediate, fragmented jottings that would naturally occur); but nothing masks the fire in Dieckmann's eyes, the controlled energy of his gesture of offer and exposition, or the eagerness in his face.

Dieckmann formally retired in 1974 but continued to teach at Cornell and elsewhere. At various times he held visiting professorships at Aix-en-Provence, Berlin, Cologne, Düsseldorf, Konstanz, and Pittsburgh. On his retirement he was honored by a lecture given (at Dieckmann's suggestion) by Paul de Man (once at Cornell but by then a professor at Yale), a younger colleague whose views on philosophy and writing offered the most serious of challenges to Dieckmann's own. It is typical of Herbert's open-mindedness and his integrity that he should have proposed de Man, and not some renowned *dix-huitièmist*e or an obedient disciple. In the late seventies, with characteristic self-effacement and devotion, Herbert busied himself with preparing the text and annotations of yet another much-needed edition: the voluminous exchange of letters between his teacher Curtius and such French writers as André Gide and the critic Charles Du Bos. (That edition, completed by Jane Dieckmann, poignantly represents the sentiments of European-minded artists and intellectuals in a France and a Germany divided by two world wars.) It was about that time that Herbert felt the first crippling effects of Alzheimer's disease: he, who had remembered the least details and made intellectual capital of them, had forgetting thrust upon him. He entered a nursing home in 1981 and lived out the rest of his life in a gradual decline.

The most spectacular scholarly episode of Herbert Dieckmann's eventful life was his rediscovery of the Diderot manuscripts. He himself has told that story with wit and feeling in a carefully elaborated paper that he twice gave as a lecture but was reluctant to have printed, since he himself necessarily appeared as the chief protagonist. In

that talk he apologized for the “painful oddity” of speaking in the first person. (The paper has recently appeared in French translation.) At Diderot’s death one set of manuscripts he had carefully prepared went to Catherine the Great, who had bought his whole library as a way of providing him with financial support. Another set (autographs and scribal copies) remained with Diderot’s only surviving child, Angélique Vandeul, who hoped with her husband’s help to produce a complete edition of her father’s works. That edition never appeared, and throughout the nineteenth century such editions of Diderot’s works as were published were for the most part prepared from clandestinely made copies of the Hermitage manuscripts. In 1929 some of the Vandeul manuscripts were exhibited at the library of the Chambre des Députés, but their location and ownership were unaccountably not made public.

In 1931 and again in 1938 Herbert Dieckmann made fruitless attempts to ferret out information from librarians and from a scholar-bibliophile who himself hoped one day to produce the great edition. In 1948, with a combination of sleuthlike flair, help from a handful of individuals, efficacious charm, and sheer pertinacity, Dieckmann established contact with the owner of the manuscripts. Herbert was able to persuade Baron Le Vavasseur not only to allow him to spend time in the family château consulting the precious and much-deteriorated papers but even to take them to the United States. There, in the unbelievably short span of two years, Dieckmann was able to prepare and publish a meticulous history and critical inventory of the many loose pages of Diderot’s autographs and the fifty-six bound volumes of excellent scribal copies of his works (often corrected in Diderot’s hand). By the time Dieckmann found the collection, many pages had already been lost, and at least twice the whole *fonds* had narrowly missed complete destruction: once because German engineers undertook to build a V-2 launching platform on the estate, another time because occupying American soldiers inadvertently set fire to the château. With the help of the French national librarian, Julien Cain, Dieckmann undertook negotiations that ended with the sale of the manuscripts to the Bibliothèque Nationale. For the first time in nearly two hundred years the manuscripts Diderot had left to his daughter became generally available to the scholarly public.

Throughout that prolonged effort Dieckmann was sustained not only by his strong feelings about truth and scholarly probity but also by a consuming love for the departed Diderot as he is revealed in the manuscripts he has left us. Diderot’s “fine, delicate” handwriting, Dieckmann writes in his *Inventaire du Fonds Vandeul*, “not only testifies to great sensitivity, I might even say a sort of tenderness, but also reveals a deeply artistic temperament, an exquisite sense of beauty in composition and form.” Those are precisely the qualities of Dieckmann’s own French prose at its best. Many qualified scholars find themselves quite baffled by Diderot’s hand; Herbert could not only decipher it with uncanny speed and accuracy but also, as it were, live in it.

Besides the *Inventaire* and *Cinq Leçons sur Diderot*, Herbert Dieckmann also published his two dissertations (on Claudel and Diderot), along with some sixty articles that brought a new animation to studies in the French Enlightenment. But it is in the introductions to his flawless critical editions of Diderot, in dialogue with the texts of his beloved author, that he communicates the most of himself and his own humanity. His hundred-and-fifty page introduction (or supplement?) to the *Supplément au Voyage de Bougainville*, for instance, is a model of the learned genre and much more besides. In reading that essay, one is first struck by Dieckmann's way of writing out, in decorous and objective scholarly language, the drama and poetry of loss: Diderot's text is ever threatened by entropy; this edition can transcribe certain words only because it was prepared from a microfilm made before the edges of the manuscript further crumbled; most everything, despite our best efforts, falls away. Diderot was in his late fifties when he wrote the *Supplément* and still in the backwash of what Dieckmann calls "a passion of one's ripe age... when apprehensions and fears of old age already cast a threatening shadow." Himself in his late forties, writing at a time of crisis and reorientation in his own life, Dieckmann meticulously describes (by anticipation, as it were) the affective and ethical conflicts that pervade the *Supplément*, most of them turning on the themes of constancy and desire, sex, and marriage. He argues that it is impossible to decide to what degree Diderot was conscious of writing out his own life in the representation of these tensions and complexities; such conscious awareness as he may have had is only manifest in sudden flashes, by fits and starts. Denying any independent value to his own commentary, Dieckmann writes, "to be sure, the text is always superior to any exegesis." And yet he adds that only exegesis can bring the text to life, "as teaching shows us every day."

Herbert Dieckmann is survived by his first wife, Liselotte Dieckmann, and their daughter, Beate Goree (a son, Martin, died in 1983); by his second wife, Jane Dieckmann (who has prepared one volume of the Dieckmann-Varloot edition and continues her collaboration in that enterprise), and their daughters, Katherine and Judith; and by two sisters in Germany, Helga Fischer and Gisela Tribull. He was decorated a Chevalier de la Legion d'Honneur; he held an honorary Doctorate of Letters from the University of Exeter (England); and he was a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and several honorary societies. Hugo Friedrich and Fritz Schalk published a volume of essays by several hands to honor him on his sixtieth birthday. Those richly deserved honors say less about Herbert than do the admiration and gratitude of his friends, colleagues, and students, among them most of the eminent Enlightenment scholars of France, Germany, and the United States. He did not die without leaving ineradicable traces.

David I. Grossvogel, Alain Seznec, Edward Morris