

George Gibian

January 29, 1924 — October 24, 1999

On October 24, 1999, George Gibian, the Goldwin Smith Professor of Russian and Comparative Literature, died suddenly in the home that he shared with his longtime and beloved partner, Karen Brazell. His life was unusually rich. George was born in Prague in 1924. With the Munich Agreement and its guarantee of a German takeover of Czechoslovakia, he was sent to England, for safety and for his studies. In 1940, after a harrowing journey across the Atlantic, the Gibian family settled in the United States. A Europe at war, however, beckoned George to return. He did so as a member of the 94th Infantry Division, which landed in Normandy in 1944. He participated in the Battle of the Bulge, and at the end of the war he was assigned to occupy the southern part of Czechoslovakia. George was decorated with the Bronze Star with the V device for Valor.

After the war, George received his Ph.D. degree in English from Harvard University. He taught at Smith, Amherst, and the University of California at Berkeley before joining the faculty at Cornell in 1961. In the process, he shifted his specialization from English to Comparative Literature and Russian Literature. His contributions to Russian literature were foundational. Indeed, George, who was appointed to the position at Cornell that had been held by Vladimir Nabokov, founded the current Russian Literature Department. Students and faculty alike will remember him for his Norton “Critical Editions” of the classics of Russian Literature. He made a major and permanent contribution to the history of Russian literature with the publication in 1971, by Cornell University Press, of his translations of the absurdist Oberiu writers, whose works had been suppressed and nearly forgotten for fifty years in Soviet Russia. He wrote and edited twenty-four books and published ninety-five articles on, among other things, Russian and Soviet literature; Czech literature; comparative literature; intersections of literature with history and politics; Russian nationalism. He kept an active interest in Czech cultural life, returning regularly to Prague and maintaining contacts with Czech writers and artists there and here. Among his last publications was a 1998 volume of verse and prose by Jaroslav Seifert, with introduction and prose translations by George.

While an undeniable part of his story, however, these facts do not capture adequately the George Gibian we knew and valued. Here, what stand out are four characteristics. One was his sheer level of activity, intellectual and physical. Just as he was always ready to develop new courses that explored aspects of Russian and East-Central European culture, so he was until his death an ardent traveler, hiker, and tennis-player. This was a man who was most comfortable when his body or his mind—or both—were on the move. Another characteristic: George always

managed to make things around him more interesting. His engagement with people and ideas was infectious. Another, perhaps most rare, was his humility. He was too fair-minded and too full of curiosity to pull rank. He was a good listener and a ready student. He enjoyed his life and those lucky enough to know him. He was as interested as he was interesting. Finally, George was a devoted family man, with some or all of his five children and two step-children and multiples of his grandchildren almost always around—especially in summer, when the entire clan would gather at the cottage on the lake, to George’s perpetual delight and even, occasionally, exhaustion. George was an inspiring and beloved teacher and an irreplaceable colleague. We will miss him.

Valerie Bunce, William Kennedy, Natalie Melas, Nancy Pollak