

## Gilbert Chaitin

A class on dreams providing, according to its students, a “lifetime’s worth of information” offering “more insights than could fit into a novel,” a way of discovering who you are and how you can best deal with the stresses and strains of existence – and all this from a professor of French and Comparative Literature. But Gil Chaitin has always been one of those quiet people constantly able to surprise and delight their colleagues by the unexpected range and nature of their interests and abilities.

Gil was born in Philadelphia in 1940. His mother’s family, who had come from Eastern Europe, considered France (slightly aided by Germany) as the home of art and culture, so it is hardly surprising that he should study both French and German. Nor is it surprising that after spending his junior year in Paris he was already moving toward concentrating on French, although he had begun his studies as a math and science major. He eventually earned a bachelor’s degree in philosophy from Princeton, and that involvement with philosophy has continued to be central to his preoccupations. In 1969 his interest in France and his fascination with other cultures led him to a Ph.D. in Romance languages and literatures with a minor in comparative literature. Although all Gil’s degrees are from Princeton, he widened his experience by pursuing his graduate studies for a year at the Sorbonne in France and another year at the University of California, Berkeley.

Gil came to Indiana University in 1966, first as a lecturer, then, on completion of the doctorate, as an assistant professor. He was promoted to associate professor in 1979 and to full professor in 1989. Indiana attracted him in the first instance because it offered him a reasonable teaching load for the times, together with the immediate opportunity to present a variety of courses in comparative literature as well as French. The department was young and dynamic, in a period of rapid expansion, and in those halcyon days an enlightened administration placed a high priority on foreign languages and cultures.

Gil’s research has always focused on situating literature in its wider intellectual, historical, and cultural contexts. His first book, a study of the nineteenth-century French novelist Stendhal, drew on his interest in psychoanalysis. *Rhetoric and Culture in Lacan* extends that interest into the broader area of cultural contexts centering on the dominant figure of the great psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, whose revision of Freud has been so influential not just in France but internationally. Gil’s current work-in-progress explores fictional accounts of schools in Third Republic France. This period immediately followed passage of the law that made education compulsory, free, and secular, and was a time of wide-ranging, often acrimonious, discussion about the nature and functions of pedagogy.

Gil has also earned several distinguished research awards. In 1977 he held a National Endowment for the Humanities Summer Fellowship at the School of Criticism and Theory of the University of California, Irvine; in 1984 he was a Mellon Regional Faculty Fellow at the Vanderbilt University Seminar on Postmodernism in Heidegger, Lacan, and Derrida; and most recently, in the academic year 1999–2000, he was awarded a fellowship at the Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton. He shared his interests and expertise with faculty and students in Portugal, when, in 1997, he spent a semester as visiting professor at the Universidade de Lisboa.

Within the profession, he has been an energetic figure, the kind of stellar citizen who takes on many responsible roles as a kind of civic duty, performing them with quiet modesty, impeccable attention to detail, and unflagging hard work. He organized the annual conference for Nineteenth-Century French Studies when it was held in Bloomington in 1981, a meeting that those who attended still recall with considerable pleasure and enthusiasm. For the Romanticism conference, chaired by Ken Johnston in Bloomington in 1988 (a conference that was in the planning stages for four years), Gil played an active organizing role as well as arranging a special session. He was general editor of the *Yearbook of Comparative and General Literature* from 1990 to 1997, and has been an assistant editor of *French Review* from 1986 to the present.

A participant in many campus activities, Gil was the chair of the Faculty Affairs Committees of both the Bloomington Faculty Council and the University Faculty Council during the time when those committees created the current salary evaluation system, the clinical ranks career system for all campuses, and many other programs. He has been acting chair of French and Italian, and of Comparative Literature (three times). Indeed, with his typical generosity, Gil agreed to delay his retirement and assume the role of acting chair of Comparative Literature this year, thus allowing the department chair to spend the year in France with his wife, who is directing the study abroad program in Aix-en-Provence.

In addition, on three occasions Gil has been resident director of full-year study abroad programs, twice in Strasbourg and once in Aix-en-Provence. He was a most capable and conscientious director: an

outstanding academic advisor with all the requirements and expectations at his fingertips, committed to the academic integrity of the programs and to pushing the students to achieve their best.

Gil has always enjoyed traveling, and many of his friends consider him more at home abroad than in the United States, happier and more expansive when dining on the Cours Mirabeau in Aix-en-Provence or visiting exhibitions in Paris. As a young man he hitchhiked across Sicily, and in the course of many such expeditions he has learned a variety of foreign languages and acquired a sophisticated and profound understanding of many other cultures. In retirement, Gil and his wife Joy will continue to live in Bloomington but plan trips to the Canadian Rockies next fall, and of course look forward to visiting France from time to time. No doubt they will also continue to delight in the exceptional success of their daughter Sharon, another gifted linguist.

Rosemary Lloyd