

## Oscar Kenshur

Oscar Kenshur, known to his friends as “Oz,” grew up learning Yiddish in a bilingual household and refining his comparatist’s ear on the playgrounds of Chicago. After earning two degrees at Northwestern University and mastering German, French, and Spanish while traveling in Europe, he completed his doctorate in comparative literature at the University of Iowa in 1977. The next year he began teaching at Indiana, where for nearly three decades he has worked to expand the definition of the discipline and to invigorate Comparative Literature as an academic department, serving as chair from 2001 until his retirement this December. For most of this time he has also held adjunct appointments in philosophy and English. As director of the Individualized Major Program from 1991 to 1997, he guided the program through a crucial phase of its development, and more recently, he has been a founding member of the interdisciplinary Center in Eighteenth-Century Studies, whose spirit of collegiality and cordial debate he helped to foster.

Almost from the start of his career, Oz has been a staunch advocate of faculty governance, serving as an officer of the Faculty-Professional Association and supporting the traditional ideals of equity and community. He has resisted the drift of higher education toward a corporate style of management, actively opposed the use of quantitative benchmarks to evaluate research in the humanities, and stood up for younger colleagues in cases where their work appeared to defy conventional criteria of academic advancement. His determination to bring his intellectual and political convictions to bear both as a teacher and as a citizen of the university, to show the same integrity in his professional duties as in his scholarly work, has provided a model of the academic life at its most engaged. In the classroom, Oz is known for his insistence on careful reading and his mistrust of easy dichotomies and received ideas. Whether commenting on a freshman’s paper or the draft of a dissertation, he will devote the same attention to student writing that he gives to his own polished prose. His popular courses on the interrelations of literature and philosophy—*The Modern Self, Ideas and Literature*, *The Enlightenment*, and *Introduction to Satire*, to name only a few—have been a foundational part of the comparative literature curriculum, and generations of students will remember with grateful awe his passion for ideas and his long reading lists.

Rigorous, lean, and erudite, his own writings on early-modern thought reflect the turn in literary study from text-immanent and aesthetic modes of interpretation to a concern with intellectual contexts. Besides offering new perspectives on major figures of the Enlightenment (Dryden, Bayle, Shaftesbury, Montesquieu, Voltaire, Diderot, Johnson, Hume, and Gibbon, among many others), he has challenged the inherited division between literature on the one hand and philosophy, science, and politics on the other. His first book, *Open Form and the Shape of Ideas: Literary Structures as Representations of Philosophical Concepts in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (1986), revised our common notions of disciplinary boundaries, interpreting the encyclopedia, for example, as a literary mode, and assailing the opposition of order and fragmentation through new readings of such “discontinuous” works as *Don Quixote*. Beginning in the late eighties his focus shifted to the critique of ideological essentialism—the notion that specific philosophical positions are inherently linked to specific political interests—a theme he developed in a series of essays published in prominent collections and journals (*Critical Inquiry*, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, and *ELH*, among others), and in his acclaimed book, *Dilemmas of Enlightenment: Studies in the Rhetoric and Logic of Ideology* (1993), which established his reputation as the critical conscience of the New Historicism.

Collateral studies, like his recent monograph on “Virtue and Defilement” in Montesquieu’s *Lettres Persanes*, have dealt with similar issues at the boundary of literature and philosophy, now advancing our understanding of Enlightenment skepticism, now exposing what Oz has called the “metaphysical snares of ideological criticism.” Through all his evolutions, he has been careful always to ground his appetite for subtle paradox in sound historical research and the nuances of specific texts. Reviewers have praised his

“reasoned, poised challenge to theoretical orthodoxies,” but also his ability to illuminate the work of individual authors, to “show in practice the wonderful complexities of the interplay of rhetoric and philosophy.” Honors have included an array of prestigious fellowships, including two from the National Endowment for the Humanities; election to the editorial boards of *Eighteenth-Century Studies* and the *Encyclopedia of the Enlightenment*; and invitations to lecture in such notable venues as the Centre d’Études sur Rhétorique, Philosophie et Histoire des Idées, École Normale Supérieure de Fontenay–Saint-Cloud, where he presented the keynote address at the conference on Pierre Bayle, and the New York Academy of Sciences. Most recently he has been focusing on the intellectual and ideological contexts of British aesthetics and ethical theory, and we look forward to the publication of his work-in-progress, *Order and Proportion: The Ideology of the Beautiful from Hobbes to Burke*.

This summer, closing the book on “the departmental vision” and entrusting the quixotic search for his replacement to colleagues, Oz will be returning for a second year, with his wife, French professor Margot Gray, and their two sons, Joseph and Nathan, to Aix-en-Provence. Though we shall miss his warmth and wisdom, we wish him all luck as he continues his own quixotic search for the ripest Banon, the crispest baguette, and his fair Dulcinea, *le mot juste*.

Herbert Marks