



Sam Goldberg

## SAMUEL LOUIS GOLDBERG

1926 - 1991

Samuel Louis Goldberg was one of Australia's most distinguished literary critics and teachers of English. He died on 11 December 1991 after some years of ill-health. His loss will be keenly felt by those generations of English students who came under his influence and who felt the moral force of his analytic attitudes. Although the kind of post-Leavisite position for which he has stood has become, not merely obsolete, but downright antipathetic to the anti-canonical voices of modern literary theory, Goldberg has been a quietly powerful influence in Australian academic culture - and, hence, even in the assumptions of secondary school English. No-one would have fought more fiercely than he against late twentieth-century attempts to dismember the concept of Literature.

Sam Goldberg was born in Melbourne in November, 1926. He was educated at Faraday Street State School, Coburg High and University High. Like many of his academic contemporaries in Melbourne, he took a Combined Honours degree in English and History, graduating with First Class Honours in 1947. In recommending this young graduate to Oxford, Professor Ian Maxwell, flamboyant Head of the English Department at Melbourne, used the succinct characterising phrase, 'Smokes a pipe but can't swim.'

At Oxford, Sam wrote his B.Litt thesis on an Elizabethan printer. Returning to Melbourne, he was appointed Lecturer in English in 1953. The brilliance of his teaching soon made its mark on the character of literary studies at that University. Like many universities in the post-War years of expansion, it was making the difficult transition from a gentlemanly enclave of sherry, anecdote and historical criticism to close reading and socio-moral judgement. A later, overseas appointment to the English Department associated this Melbournian critical emphasis with lower middle class morality. If so, there was nothing dishonourable about its flair and fire, although later generations have seen it as undertheorized.

As a teacher of third- and fourth-year Honours students, Sam was remarkable, as anyone who sat through his tutorials meticulously demolishing the opening stanzas of *The Faerie Queene* will remember. He was particularly brilliant on Elizabethan and Metaphysical poetry: his dazzlingly close insights into 'the double nature of man' are preserved in his early *Melbourne Critical Review* essays on Marvell, Marlowe and Shakespeare, essays which displayed slow reading at its most seductive. *The Critical Review* (to use its later name) was essentially a Goldberg creation, and it has been the vehicle for his influence in the years since 1958. Its first decade was particularly interesting and provocative.

After having been a Senior Lecturer in the Melbourne Department for some years, Sam was appointed to the Challis Chair of

English Literature at the University of Sydney. He arrived in Sydney bearing the shining brand of neo-Leavisite rigour, but found the changes which he desired very difficult to effect in that rocky soil. There was keen political division in the Sydney Department and he returned to Melbourne as Robert Wallace Professor in 1967, bringing with him such innovations as the Honours Literature and Thought seminar, a new cultural study of what was beginning to be called Modernism. I recall his bemusing one of these seminars by making the observation that Proust couldn't possibly have been the son of a coal miner.

In 1961 Sam published *The Classical Temper*, an acutely reasoned study of Ulysses. He also showed his gift for popular criticism in *James Joyce*, the following year, which was a remarkably clear, condensed study of the novelist and his oeuvre. In 1974 he published *An Essay on King Lear*.

The heavy burden of being a god-professor took some toll of Sam in his middle years, but for all that he resented the tide of change in the 1970s, a tide which left departments more democratic, pluralist and decentred. In 1976 he resigned from the Robert Wallace Chair and joined the History of Ideas unit at the Australian National University. It is my belief that he regretted the lack of student contact in his new situation; certainly he kept up some English teaching in the Faculty of Arts. And from 1982 to 1988 he edited *Australian Cultural History*. But it remains a pity that his great flair as a teacher and as a meticulous supervisor was not fully employed in his later career.

Sam Goldberg was a deeply conservative man, stubborn and sometimes gruff in his resistance to fads and neologisms; he was a great lover of Modernist and Renaissance literature. And I shall never forget the introspective phrase which he coined: 'What my mind is thinking is this.' He was an epistemologist without being a philosopher. Few academics have left their personal stamp so strongly and so idiosyncratically on the study of literature in Australia.

*Chris Wallace-Crabbe*