

Her Own Poetics

Judith Nisse Shklar Memorial Service

November 6, 1992

IT WAS NOT my good fortune to know Judith Shklar well. Our few encounters were brief, but the darting, rapid exchanges, with all the intellectual and human intensity that Dita brought to them, always made up in height for whatever they may have lacked in length. A totally forgettable French eighteenth-century poet once sent what he believed to be his most brilliant epigrammatic couplet (two short lines) to the Comte de Rivarol. "Very nice," came the immediate reply from the Count, "but there are some dull stretches." Anyone who ever encountered Dita, for even the most fleeting of moments, knew that there were no dull stretches in any of her couplets. She was the inventor of her own poetics: powerful, vivacious, pointed, and inimitable.

I have been asked to say a few words about Dita's contribution to the University as a whole, as well as to her profession. She came to Harvard as a graduate student in 1950, and remained here throughout her entire career. This was not at all her original intention. As she said (in a wonderful talk given in 1989), she had expected to work in what she called "high-class literary journal-

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ism”; “I would have liked,” she said, “to be a literary editor of the *Atlantic* or some such publication.” Instead, she was taken by surprise by the offer of an instructorship in the Government Department, and she then surprised herself by accepting the offer.

The road, as she readily acknowledged, was far from easy. Women academics were not at all part of the Harvard scene at that time, and Dita was teaching, writing books, and raising a family simultaneously. “The crunch came,” as she put it, “when the matter of tenure finally came up. My department could not bring itself to say either yes or no. . . . [So] I went to the dean and asked him if I could have a half-time appointment with effective tenure and lecturer’s title. It was not exactly what I wanted, but it was what I decided to arrange for myself, rather than wait for others to tell me what I was worth.”

Without undue self-consciousness, but with that spontaneous habit of choosing freely and decisively to determine her own fate, Dita pioneered, making her own way, but also making the way smoother for women and many others who came later.

In 1971, President Derek Bok (only recently inaugurated) worked with the Government Department to see that Dita was soon awarded the tenured full professorship that she had long since earned.

Over the course of her decades at Harvard, she wrote eight books that were invariably singled out for honors and acclaim. In 1984, she won a MacArthur Fellowship, which enabled her to do the scholarship and writing that she relished so much, traveling, as she did, from Harvard to Oxford and Cambridge Universities. In 1989, she became president of the American Political Science Association, the first woman to serve in that capacity.

She was not, I think, what we would normally call a “committee person.” She was always ready to do her fair share and more, but if we were to sum up her contribution to the larger University community, it would surely be in terms of the way that she embodied the values – in all their distilled purity – of a great uni-

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versity: the example of independence matched with integrity, passion with analytic power, engagement balanced by a wise skepticism and detachment, a commitment to teaching but a primary driving desire to discover new ways and new ideas to help us understand reality.

Let me conclude with a passage in which Dita characterized herself and her role: “The reason why I teach political theory,” she said, “is not that I just like the company of young people, but that I love the subject unconditionally. . . . As I look at myself, I see that I have often been moved to oppose theories that did not only seem wrong to me, but also excessively fashionable. I do not simply reject, out of hand, the prevailing notions and doctrines, but complacency, metaphysical comforts, and the protection of either sheltered despair or cozy optimism drive me into intellectual action. I do not want to settle down with one of the available conventions.” It is hard to think of any better way to describe Dita Shklar’s contribution to Harvard than as a continuous example of “intellectual action” in the vibrant form of someone who refused to settle down in complacency or conformity.