

*At a meeting of the FACULTY OF ARTS AND SCIENCES on April 2, 2013, the following
tribute to the life and service of the late Dorrit Cohn
was spread upon the permanent records of the Faculty.*

DORRIT COHN

BORN: August 9, 1924

DIED: March 10, 2012

Dorrit Cohn, internationally recognized as a major literary theorist and one of the first women to be appointed to tenure at Harvard (she joined the Harvard Faculty in 1971), was born Dorrit Claire Zucker in Vienna, Austria, the younger daughter in a prosperous, assimilated Jewish family. Her father, Herbert Zucker, owned a hat factory in a small town in Czechoslovakia, where the family often spent summer vacations. Her mother, née Hirsch, belonged to a family that pioneered the manufacture of bentwood furniture in the same town. Dorrit grew up with the cultural and educational privileges of her class: she studied music, was fluent in French, and loved theater and opera. This comfortable life came to an abrupt end in March 1938, when Hitler's troops marched into Austria and annexed it to Nazi Germany. The Zucker family had the good fortune to leave the country just before the *Anschluss*. The following year, after temporary sojourns in Zurich and Paris, they arrived in New York, where Dorrit was enrolled in the Lycée Français and obtained her baccalaureate.

In 1941 Dorrit was admitted to Radcliffe College, graduating four years later with a major in physics. She liked to tell the story of how she switched from physics to literature. The decision came to her like a revelation in her senior year, after reading Thomas Mann's novel *The Magic Mountain* while recuperating from an illness. Mann's writing changed her life, and she was later to devote one of her best-known essays to his complex use of the narrative voice in his novels.

In 1945 Dorrit Zucker started graduate work in comparative literature at Radcliffe where she obtained a Master's degree; the following year she enrolled in the Ph.D. program at Yale, where she met and married her fellow student Robert Greer Cohn. Like many women at the time, she felt she could not combine a demanding career with marriage and motherhood. After the birth of her first child, Steve, in 1949, she interrupted her studies and did not resume them again until 1962. She obtained her doctorate from Stanford with a dissertation on the Austrian modernist novelist Hermann Broch. Soon after, she was offered a teaching position at Indiana University, moving there with her children. She earned tenure and remained in Bloomington until 1971, when she was appointed Professor of Germanic Languages and Literatures at Harvard. In 1984 she was invited to join Harvard's Department of Comparative Literature.

In 1980 Dorrit and several other colleagues founded the undergraduate concentration in Literature, whose focus was on literary theory, a somewhat neglected subject at Harvard until then. This was the heyday of structuralism and poststructuralism, methodological approaches that proposed to analyze literary texts as autonomous entities governed by their specific modes of functioning. Dorrit made a landmark contribution to the field of narrative theory in 1978 with the publication of her book *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness in Fiction*, a landmark work that is still assigned in graduate seminars today as the standard work on the subject. The attention it has received recently from scholars studying theory of mind and evolutionary psychology reveals just how wide and lasting the influence of this work has been.

All of Dorrit Cohn's scholarly writings had a luminous quality. Although she claimed to address dry, technical issues, when it came to the study of narrative, she turned science into art as she explored the intricacies of Kafka's *The Castle*, Freud's case histories, and works by authors ranging from Proust and Beckett to Schnitzler, Hofmannsthal, and Mann. Her prize-winning book *The Distinction of Fiction* (published in 1999, when she was 75 years old) captured in its title a hallmark of her scholarly work. She was a master in making fine distinctions and in taking texts apart, only to put them back together again in ways that led to deeper understanding and appreciation. She famously worried about her *esprit géométrique*, when in fact her work always bore the mark of *finesse* and had the stamp of real style.

The same can be said of Dorrit Cohn's teaching. Students flocked to her courses on the modern novel, on turn-of-the-century Vienna, and on the fairy tale and novella. Quietly charismatic, she combined broad erudition and disciplinary rigor with intellectual firepower. She taught her students the pleasures of deep, complex literary analysis and modeled for them how to combine analytic precision with attention to textual detail and cultural connotations. Her students went on to teach at major research universities, with many of them continuing her work, but less as loyal disciples than as adventurous scholars striking out into new territory. She always resisted the idea of merely perpetuating methodologies rather than renewing and reinvigorating them; she felt slightly embarrassed, rather than flattered, by imitation.

After retiring from Harvard in 1995, Dorrit studied Ancient Greek and wrote about Platonic dialogues. She translated works from French and German, most notably Jean-Marie Schaeffer's *Why Fiction?*, and she continued to read widely in fiction and literary criticism. At her second home in Wellfleet, where she had spent the summers for many years, she swam and played tennis with her family and with colleagues and students, who had the chance to enjoy her hospitality and share her love of Cape Cod.

Dorrit Cohn died on March 10, 2012, of complications from Parkinson's disease. She is survived by her two sons, Steve Cohn, Director of Duke University Press, and Richard Cohn, Battell Professor of Music Theory at Yale University, and by four grandchildren, as well as by many friends, colleagues, and students who cherish the memory of a scholar who taught us how to read fiction and how to explore minds, always with transparent distinction.

Respectfully submitted,

Donald Fanger
Werner Sollors
Susan Rubin Suleiman
Maria Tatar, Chair