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## JAMES GRAY WATSON 1939 - 2010

JAMES GRAY WATSON (JUNE 16, 1939 - MARCH 30, 2010) WAS BORN IN Baltimore, completed undergraduate work at Bowdoin College, and earned the M.A. and Ph.D. in English at the University of Pittsburgh. He taught English for over forty years at the University of Tulsa, ending his career there as the Frances W. O'Hornett Professor of Literature. He was recognized as one of the world's leading scholars in William Faulkner, whose works he examined in a series of books, articles, and lectures; and he was recently at work on the writings of Peter Matthiessen. He enjoyed repeating the story of how he was introduced to Faulkner's works while a student at Bowdoin, when he was given a copy of *As I Lay Dying* as he recovered from a lacrosse injury. In addition to his international academic reputation, Jim's extraordinary commitment to his students and to the University of Tulsa earned repeated recognition. He was Outstanding University Professor (1982); he earned the Certificate of Honor from the Multicultural Affairs Committee (1991) and the Arts and Sciences Excellence in Teaching Award (2002); and he was Undergraduate Research Challenge Mentor of the Year (2007). He also shared his knowledge and enthusiasm for literature by providing lectures and other civic services about town, for example, serving on the board that selected Eudora Welty as the recipient of the 1991 Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award, given annually by the Tulsa Library Trust. In his honor, the University of Tulsa has established the James G. Watson Endowed Professorship of English.

I first came to know Jim when I was a graduate student at the University of Tulsa in the 1970s, and then in the 1980s he became my dissertation director. He was an outstanding teacher and mentor, a fierce defender when there was need, a warm and generous supporter and friend. After his untimely death from pancreatic cancer, the memorial service on campus was an appropriate celebration of the life of a Man of Letters. The faculty processed in full regalia, and his students came too. Appropriate scripture readings by the Dean of Chapel alternated with collegial tributes and remembrances. There were passages from Faulkner and Matthiessen, but also from poets—Hopkins, Whitman, MacLeish, Emerson—that recalled Jim's delightful facility for recitation. He demonstrated that facility during the last experience I had with him, which now provides a capstone to the kind of vigorous discussions of

literature that I remember enjoying with him. It was after the stroke he suffered in 2009 had damaged his eyesight and I had been called to teach his graduate seminar "Writing the American South." He sat in on one class and, unable to see the text well, quoted several authors from memory. He seemed still in his prime, and not only to me. This verse from Emerson captioned his photograph in the Chapel's memorial bulletin:

Olympian bards who sung  
 Divine ideas below,  
 Which always find us young,  
 And always keep us so.

*Ruth D. Weston*



"I'M TEACHING MY FINAL FAULKNER SEMINAR THIS TERM AND HOPE TO BE able to finish it," wrote James Gray Watson, the Frances W. O'Hornett Professor of Literature at the University of Tulsa, on January 31, 2010. He was also preparing to deliver a "last lecture" prior to retirement with new colleague Professor Robert Jackson, who would be presenting a "first lecture." In his correspondence a few weeks later, he eagerly anticipated meeting colleagues at the fall 2010 South Central Modern Language Association Conference, where he hoped to present a paper on Peter Matthiessen's fiction, the subject of his nearly completed book. In the face of rapidly declining health, Professor Watson characteristically looked forward with enthusiasm to his research, students, and colleagues.

His books on William Faulkner include *The Snopes Dilemma: Faulkner's Trilogy*, *William Faulkner: Letters and Fictions*, *Thinking of Home: William Faulkner's Letters to His Mother and Father, 1918-1925*, and *William Faulkner, Self-Presentation and Performance*. His articles appeared in over twenty-eight collections of essays and scholarly journals. In 2007 he was guest editor of the William Faulkner special issue of the *Mississippi Quarterly*. His many book reviews were published in *Modern Fiction Studies* and journals of similar standing.

Professor Watson presented over forty lectures and papers in international, national, and regional settings and served on the editorial board of the journals *Southern Literary Studies* and the *South Central Review*.

For ten years Professor Watson chaired the Faculty of English at the University of Tulsa. He was elected President of the South Central Modern Language Association for 1990-1991. In his many positions of leadership at his university and the profession, he encouraged and supported his colleagues and students.

An avid tennis player, Professor Watson talked often about the role of tennis in Faulkner's fiction as well as the pleasure of a smooth ground stroke. He still felt the impact of American literary history at Bowdoin College, where he studied as an undergraduate. His practice of textual criticism was exemplary. His wife Ann, his children, and grandchildren were important parts of his daily life. True to his character, in facing the news of his impending death, he wrote, "As for now we're keeping our chin up—and our glasses full in the evening before dinner." Professor Noel Polk aptly described him as "A lovely man."

*Thomas Bonner, Jr.*



