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Hugh Witemeyer

By James L. Thorson

Professor Hugh Witemeyer, who passed away after a short illness on May 1, 2022, frequently attended annual meetings of the James Joyce Society with his wife Barbara. She recently recalled attending several such meetings, but one memory stood out. They were staying in a bed and breakfast near Dublin, and on Bloomsday, as they entered the breakfast room, Hugh, hailed the breakfasting group with a jolly “Happy Bloomsday!” The Irish landlady responded with “Is that a popular American holiday?” and Hugh broke into uncontrolled laughter.

Hugh’s laughter was noteworthy in part because it was loud and usually unrestrained, and it was infectious. In addition to often being on stage in amateur dramatic productions in Albuquerque, Hugh and Barb were very faithful attendees at the productions of various companies. Directors were said to be happy when Hugh was in the audience, as his full-throated laugh invited others to join in the merriment.

While I am on matters dramatic, I must mention a script for a dramatic reading of interest to Joyceans. For the James Joyce annual meeting in 1991 in Vancouver, Hugh and a friend, Professor Ed Walkiewicz of Oklahoma State University, produced a short drama called “*Ulysses* and United States Censorship Laws.” The script reproduced, from the *Congressional Record* no less, a US Senate debate between Senator Bronson Cutting of New Mexico and Senator Reed Smoot of Utah on a tariff bill which included a section on the censorship of obscene materials by the US Post Office. The exchanges in the Senate are hilarious and led to the inclusion, in the final form of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, of a provision for referring questions about obscene materials to the federal court system. This inclusion, of course, led directly to the court decision of December 23, 1933, by Judge John M. Woolsey that found *Ulysses* not to be obscene and finally to be admissible to the United States. The two friends did not try to publish the script, as it was intended for only the one performance, but it bears rereading in the current era of attacks on libraries and their holdings.

Hugh’s devotion to intellectual freedom led him to be a long-time member of the American Association of University Professors and to serve as president of the University of New Mexico chapter of that organization twice. Hugh taught for a time at the University of California, Berkeley, but spent most of his academic career as Professor of English at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

His undergraduate degree in English was from the University of Michigan. From Ann Arbor, he won a Marshall Scholarship to University College, Oxford, and subsequently received his Ph.D. from Princeton University. He was awarded fellowships by the American Council of Learned Societies and the National Endowment for the Humanities. He held Fulbright awards to teach at Würzburg and Münster in Germany and was an exchange professor at the National University of Australia in Canberra. He also served as President of the Ezra Pound Society from 1992 to 1996.

Hugh’s first book, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound: Forms and Renewal, 1908-1920* (University of California Press, 1969, paperback, 1981), appeared with the following blurb from Hugh Kenner on its dust jacket: “An indispensable contribution to Pound studies.” The paperback edition prints glowing extracts from several reviews, calling it “a splendid study” (*Sewanee Review*), and “the most useful single guide available” (*Modern Philology*). The works of James Joyce are often woven into his arguments about Pound’s early poetry.

Hugh’s broad interest in modernism was to provide the focus of another of Hugh’s books, this one a collection of essays by various hands called *The Future of Modernism* (University of Michigan Press, 1997). The eleven essayists all began their careers by writing dissertations under the guidance

of Professor A. Walton Litz at Princeton University, to whom the volume is dedicated. Royalties from the book are devoted to the Princeton University Library in Professor Litz's name.

Hugh's keen interest in the correspondence of poets led him to edit and publish several collections of letters. Among these volumes are *William Carlos Williams and James Laughlin: Selected Letters* (Norton, 1989), W. B. Yeats's *Letters to the New Island* (with George Bornstein, Macmillan, 1989), *Pound/Williams: Selected Letters of Ezra Pound and William Carlos Williams* (New Directions, 1996), *The Letters of William Carlos Williams and Charles Tomlinson* (with Barry Magid, Dim Gray Bar Press, 1992), and *Ezra Pound and Senator Bronson Cutting: A Political Correspondence, 1930-1935* (with E.P. Walkiewicz, University of New Mexico Press, 1995).

Another single-author work by Hugh, one that he said "came from the heart" is *George Eliot and the Visual Arts* (Yale University Press, 1979). It reveals his mastery of critical theory across artistic genres. A mutual friend from Oxford remarked in a recent email exchange that "[t]he book I admire very much of Hugh's is about George Eliot and the arts."

Of special interest to Joyceans is a piece found only in Hugh's personal notes. It is a six-page single-spaced typescript entitled "Orientational Notes on James Joyce's *Ulysses* (1922)." Hugh mentions his indebtedness to the works of Stuart Gilbert, William York Tindall, and the teaching notes of his longtime friend and UNM colleague, David R. Jones. The notes make for fascinating reading and make me sad not to have sat in on Hugh's teaching of *Ulysses*. They are dense with intellectual learning and love of a great literary text. They also reveal the work of a demanding teacher.

His retirement from teaching in 2004 was marked by a symposium that included a major contribution by the Native American poet and prose writer Simon J. Ortiz. Simon was among a large number of Native American writers, artists, artisans, filmmakers, and cultural authorities who were friends of the Witmeyers. Simon's contribution to the symposium consisted of a mystical take on the poet's understanding of the bonds between the poet, his native language (Keres, the language of Acoma Pueblo), and the mountains and villages of Acoma. Hugh was a leading figure in the successful movement to award an honorary degree to Leslie Marmon Silko, another major Native American writer of poetry, stories, and novels and a graduate of the English department of UNM. He also managed to get the university to grant an honorary degree to the poet Robert Creeley, who had earned an MA from UNM and served on the creative writing faculty for several years before moving to the University at Buffalo.

Though Hugh did not publish on Native American literature, he and Barb were very knowledgeable about Native American matters and attended many of the ceremonial events that take place in New Mexico. Barb was for many years a leading docent at the Indian Pueblo Cultural Center, a major institution in Albuquerque.

Though generally extremely rational, Hugh indulged in occasional feelings of wonder. On one occasion, several of us made a car trip to Taos, New Mexico, on behalf of the American Association of University Professors to stir up interest in our organization among faculty members at UNM's Taos branch. As our car entered the canyon of the Rio Grande River just north of Velarde, New Mexico, a majestic bald eagle appeared in the sky ahead of our vehicle and for a couple of minutes sailed along ahead of us up the canyon. Hugh was absolutely convinced that the eagle's apparently leading us forward was a positive omen, though to what future event it was to be attached was not clear. That same highway also leads to the D. H. Lawrence ranch and to Taos Pueblo, both of which Hugh visited many times, but they were not among our destinations on that particular trip.

Hugh was an active, though not always successful, agitator on the faculty senate at UNM during his years in Albuquerque. He once introduced a motion to ask the administration to withdraw financial support from the athletics department of the university. A visiting German professor recalled hearing Hugh remark, when his motion failed to be accepted by the administration, that "We all need our windmills."

Many years ago, Hugh and I were playing golf on the UNM Championship Course. We had just finished the ninth hole when a foursome came out of the clubhouse and tried to take the tenth tee ahead of us. As I mentioned above, Hugh was a big man, and on this occasion, he walked up to the tee with his driver in his hand, and said “Gentlemen, I believe it is our tee.” The other group scattered, and we teed off. Hugh was not threatening in any way but was conscious of his size and dignity. As he once remarked of a young man from a village in northern New Mexico who had just finished a practice interview for a Rhodes Scholarship which he later won: “He was a Mensch!” So was Hugh, and he was also a brilliant scholar. Hugh will be missed by all who knew him both in and out of academe.

—*University of New Mexico, Albuquerque*