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## A World Without Tom Staley: A Tribute

Morris Beja



*Photo by Marsha Miller*

*Photo courtesy of the Harry Ransom Center*

**T**homas F. Staley died on March 29, 2022, at the age of 86. The many prominent obituaries about him have understandably tended to emphasize his superhuman accomplishments at the University of Texas Harry Ransom Center; we'll get to those, but here we inevitably begin with James Joyce.

Of few people can it be so confidently said—as it can of Tom Staley—that it is difficult to imagine what Joyce studies would be like if those people had not come along. In that alternative reality, would someone else have started something like the *James Joyce Quarterly*? Who knows? Eventually, one supposes.

Would someone else have initiated the *Joyce Studies Annual*? Probably not, though maybe.

Would someone else have been a mover and shaker to co-found the International James Joyce Foundation? Hard to tell.

Would we have without him the International James Joyce Symposium as it now exists? Almost certainly not.

Perhaps Fritz Senn and Bernard Benstock—the co-founders with him of both the Foundation and the Symposia—could and would have created those institutions without Tom's participation, but it has always seemed that

it was all due to all three of them.

And, in turn, what would Joyce studies be without the *Quarterly* or the *Annual*? Or without the Foundation and the Symposia? Don't even think about it.

The basic point, of course, is that no one else did, in fact, do all that Tom Staley did for Joyce studies, over decades.

Let's get the basic record straight. Tom earned a B.A. at Regis College, an M.A. at the University of Tulsa (he had grown up in Tulsa), and his Ph.D. with a dissertation on F. Scott Fitzgerald in 1962 at the University of Pittsburgh (he was born in Pittsburgh). He returned to the University of Tulsa that year as an Assistant Professor; he had already taught for a year at Rollins College in Florida.

Within two years, in 1964, Staley brought out the first issue of the *James Joyce Quarterly*. (Among the first subscribers was one John Lennon, who would continue to send in subscription renewals.) It was at first a very modest affair of thirty-six pages, but Tom expanded and edited it for twenty-six years. Within another couple of years, he had his first of two Fulbright years in Trieste, and while in Europe in 1966, he visited a young Swiss man in Zürich: Fritz Senn, who was also interested in the work of James Joyce. The previous year Fritz had also been visited by Bernard Benstock of Kent State University. Tom and Fritz then asked Berni to join with them in planning a Joyce conference to be held in Dublin, a get-together that with admirable chutzpah they called the First International James Joyce Symposium. It met for just two days in June 1967, the fifteenth and of course the sixteenth, with only twelve papers and a single panel of six people.

The three dynamos also decided to create what they called—again with commendable ambition—the James Joyce Foundation, to be headquartered at Tulsa. Giorgio Joyce agreed to be the honorary director, and the first honorary trustees were Frank Budgen and Umberto Eco. Tom was its first president, a post he kept until 1973, when he was succeeded by Berni. Meanwhile, they had the moxie to go ahead with a second, bigger Symposium, two years after the first, in 1969, this one lasting for a whole week. Tom continued to co-direct a number of the subsequent Symposia, including the one in 1973 that returned to Dublin after a year in Trieste. Meanwhile, he had also directed and hosted an “off-year” conference in Tulsa in 1972. When the Symposium went back to Dublin in 1977, he served as liaison with London for an extension in that city.

At Tulsa his career thrived. He became a full professor, and in turns the dean of the Graduate School, the dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, and the provost. He was instrumental in bringing to Tulsa's McFarlin

Library important papers not only by Joyce but also by Harriet Shaw Weaver, Paul and Lucie Léon, Edmund Wilson, and Richard Ellmann, as well as those of Jean Rhys, about whom he wrote a pioneering study. His accomplishments in literary acquisitions made it clear that when the directorship of the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas became open, the position had “Thomas F. Staley” written all over it. It was a job he was meant for, and he ran with it. He was the director for twenty-five years, from 1988 to 2013.

That’s not all he did. At Texas he also created and edited, until 2004, the *Joyce Studies Annual*. He somehow also found the time for scholarship and criticism. Tom Staley published fifteen books: on Joyce, of course, as well as on Rhys, Italo Svevo, Dorothy Richardson, and other aspects of modernist literature.

Nor is that all he did. Tom edited a series on literary modernism for the University of Texas Press and served on several editorial boards, including those for *Twentieth-Century Literature*, the *Journal of Modern Literature*, and the Library of America. And of course he became an honorary trustee of what was by then appropriately re-named the International James Joyce Foundation.

To catalogue the holdings he brought to the Ransom Center is to list a pantheon of twentieth-century literature. Among his earliest grabs at Texas was the archive of Stuart Gilbert, the translator and author of one of the earliest and for decades one of the most influential studies of *Ulysses*. (Tom published portions of Gilbert’s diary in the first volume of the *Annual*.) An abbreviated list of the authors for whom he acquired at least some papers includes Samuel Beckett, Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward, Anthony Burgess, J. M. Coetzee, David Hare, Don DeLillo, William Faulkner, Graham Greene, Ernest Hemingway, Denis Johnson, Doris Lessing, Penelope Lively, Norman Mailer, Bernard Malamud, David Mamet, Arthur Miller, John Osborne, Ezra Pound, Anne Sexton, Isaac Bashevis Singer, C. P. Snow, Stephen Spender, John Steinbeck, Tom Stoppard, David Foster Wallace, Arnold Wesker, Edith Wharton, Virginia Woolf—and James Joyce.

Once, at a conference in England, Tom was confronted with British arguments that national treasures belong where they were originally created. “Like the Elgin Marbles?” he replied. It was not a bitter retort, but rather a sincere as well as witty one. He was inevitably able to keep his good humor and was invariably open and generous. No one without Tom’s charm could have been so successful in what he did.

Suitably, the University of Texas has established the Thomas F. Staley Endowment for Excellence in the Humanities to “support the acquisition of important cultural archives.”

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I once had the chance to peek at Tom's "résumé"; in it his "fields" were listed as "Building Library Collections," "Modern British Literature," "James Joyce," and "Humanistic Research." If there are better fields to be in, or of which to be an acknowledged and honored master, I don't know them.

—*The Ohio State University*