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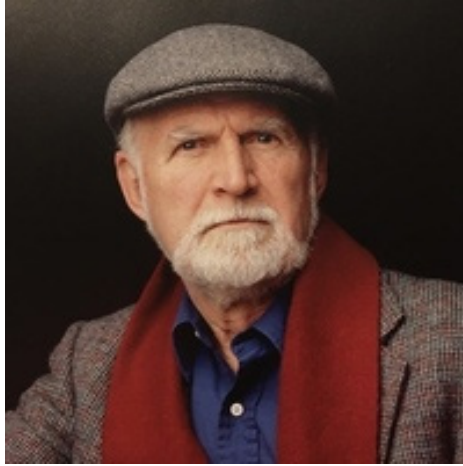
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Tribute to Weldon Thornton

Robert Newman



*Photo by John Walsh of Walsh
Photography in Greensboro, NC
Photo courtesy of Robert Newman*

Weldon Thornton, who passed from this earth on July 15, 2021, at age 86, was a remarkable man who provided foundational thinking and inspiration to generations of students and Joyce scholars. He taught for forty-four years at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, rising to the rank of chaired professor and serving as a mentor for deeply grateful students whose lives he profoundly influenced through his warmth, compassion, and model of diligence and curiosity.

His sixty-five year marriage to Barbara was enduring in its devotion and generosity. In addition to Barbara, he is survived by three sons, six grandchildren, and three great-grandchildren. The Thorntons' home, built entirely by Weldon, his father, and his sons, was the social space for UNC's English department—from Friday afternoon volleyball games to the legendary annual pig-pickin' for graduate students and faculty to Christmas-time caroling and shape-note singing. It was a home that reflected Weldon's sincere and helpful engagement with his friends, neighbors, and students. To be in Weldon's presence was to be both simultaneously challenged and comforted. He challenged

you to do your best and to do it with respect for yourself and for others. He also motivated through his own example of conscientiousness and support. To his students, Weldon was both father-figure and friend, the embodiment of a perfect mentor.

I remember well an incident from my graduate student days when I was teaching *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* to an Introduction to Literature class at UNC. I used Weldon's framework for understanding the chiasmic structure of the novel and, knowing he taught the class that followed mine in the same room, left my outline on the blackboard. When I saw him later that day, he asked if I was the one teaching *A Portrait*. When I replied affirmatively, he said, "Well, imitation is the highest form of flattery, but you forgot to wash your dishes."

Weldon grew up in Georgia, was an undergraduate chemistry major at Mercer University, and then went on to earn an MA in English at Emory University and a PhD in literature at the University of Texas. His detailed and revelatory close reading of texts produced his *Allusions in Ulysses*, initially published in installments in the early issues of the *James Joyce Quarterly*. It became an essential companion for students and scholars of *Ulysses*. He went on to publish five books, including works on Joyce, Lawrence, Synge, and modernism, as well as dozens of articles, adhering to a passionate belief in the crucial and transformational value of literature to individual fulfillment and collective understanding. He also earnestly railed against what he considered the constraints imposed by an obfuscating critical vocabulary that undercut the promotion of literary understanding and values. Much of his later work centered on the need for fellow academics to, using Stephen Dedalus's phrase, "free our minds from our minds' bondage."

Weldon's range of interests was capacious. He recommended both Seamus Heaney and Doc Watson for the honorary degrees they received from UNC. He loved riding his tractor at his mountain home in rural North Carolina and was actively engaged with his neighbors there as well as with his academic colleagues in Chapel Hill. His lack of pretention and his steadfast reliability combined with an easy humor and gentle wit to which people of varying ages and backgrounds gravitated. He possessed extraordinary listening skills to go with an endearing Irish twinkle which made even serious moments fun.

Weldon and I co-edited *Joyce's Ulysses: The Larger Perspective* shortly after he directed my dissertation on *Ulysses*. Working with him taught me the importance of thoroughness and clarity to good scholarship. During the heady days of post-structuralism when I was working on a new book on narrative theory, I sent Weldon a draft of the first chapter, which was filled with

Derridean pyrotechnics and leaps. Weldon began his response, which contained his careful edits, “writing chaotically about chaos does not necessarily offer a contribution.” It was the understated but firm reprimand I needed to produce a better book.

Despite his scholarly accomplishments, Weldon thought of himself first and foremost as a teacher. During his career, he won five awards for excellence in teaching, culminating in the Board of Governors’ Award for Excellence in Teaching in 2000. Many of his graduate students went on to distinguished academic careers, and his numerous undergraduates cherished their time in his classroom. His favorite course was a Great Books first-year Honors course he taught regularly from 1962 until his retirement in 2005.

I asked Barbara to send me some of the scores of responses she received from Weldon’s former students upon learning of his passing. I offer some below:

“He made me believe in myself when I was an under-confident graduate student. I could take his brilliant treatment of James Joyce and his cultural milieu into my classes and my writing throughout my career.”

“As a teacher and dissertation director, he was perfection. I learned from watching him how important it was for faculty to bring the books themselves to class, not just their lecture notes about the books. Every single thing I turned in to him he returned within one week with clear instructions in almost legible handwriting telling me how to “fix” it so I could move forward. What a gift! When exiting my dissertation defense, I turned around to thank Weldon and was dumbfounded to discover he was not 6’6” tall, having spent the two years we worked together thinking he was a giant.”

“I met Weldon at a time in my life when I was somewhat adrift. At the age of 25, having spent a few years working in offices and hating it, without a clue as to what I wanted to do with my life, I moved to Chapel Hill, where some friends from high school had already settled. I found work as a laborer building the YMCA on Airport Road, but I quickly realized that I wasn’t going to want to carry concrete around in wheelbarrows for long. Having loved my English classes as an undergrad, I asked some friends about the English Department at UNC and heard right away about a teacher named Weldon Thornton, who was said to be the very best. So one day, on a break from work, I showed up at Weldon’s office door covered with dust and wearing my concrete-covered boots. As you can imagine, he received me not as some dirty and dusty construction worker, but gracefully and with interest, and he encouraged me to consider taking some graduate courses. I quit the YMCA job and took employment as a cataloger at Wilson Library, which allowed me to take a free course every semester as a UNC staff member. The

real revelation came when I enrolled in Weldon's famous graduate-level Irish lit survey as my first course; as you know, Weldon's syllabi were very thorough and demanding, but his passion for the material was so compelling that I ate up the Irish lit class and then enrolled in his Ulysses seminar. At that point, Weldon encouraged me to apply for the MA program, and the rest is history."

"Weldon touched so many lives. As a teacher, he shared his love and his vision of literature and gifted us all with the ability to pass it on. I remember sitting on a rock at Coole Park near the pond teaching students the poem 'The Wild Swans at Coole' just as Weldon taught me. It struck me then what a profound impact he had on us all—even on students he has never met."

"Dr. Thornton taught my Honors English seminar first semester of my freshman year in 1988, and I took a class from him every year hence, often dragging friends along with me who did not know that they might be interested in James Joyce, D. H. Lawrence, or anti-modernist thought. I always felt a bit like he was my fabulous professor that I was generously sharing with the friends who followed me into his classroom. With his letter of support, I attended Harvard Medical School where I met my husband. He came to our wedding in Asheville in April of 1994. Both my medical career and my family (four children!) have brought me so much joy and purpose, so there has been a touch of thematic unity in my life that has carried on from moments when Weldon Thornton was there. I have never forgotten that and am so grateful for all that he taught me."

"Weldon was not only a great teacher in the classroom but a wonderful model, one who lived out his role as mentor so fully and naturally. He was such a warm and encouraging man—even as he was rigorous and set high expectations. My love for Irish literature, and my confidence in introducing American students to Ireland, will forever be rooted in my experience with Weldon. I can never forget him, his kindness, and his wisdom."

"A legend at UNC, a great teacher, and the best damned pig picker I ever saw."

In his book, *Voices and Values in Joyce's Ulysses*, Weldon spoke of "the engaged reader," one capable of responding to and enjoying the nuances of any rich text in ways that transcend "the categories and labels that we foist upon it." In participating in the mystery and complexity of such texts, the engaged reader recognizes the inadequacy of our critical models to describe all that is going on while simultaneously seeking to impose meaning.

As a scholar, as a teacher, and as a man, Weldon was such an engaged reader of the nuances of great books and of life itself. He participated fully and joyfully in their many dimensions, always giving back as much, if not more, than he received. His was a life well lived, full of positive, indeed pro-

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found, influence that made those who knew him better for having done so.
He will be sorely missed.

—*President and Director, National Humanities Center*