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In memoriam James Peter Thorne, 1933–1988

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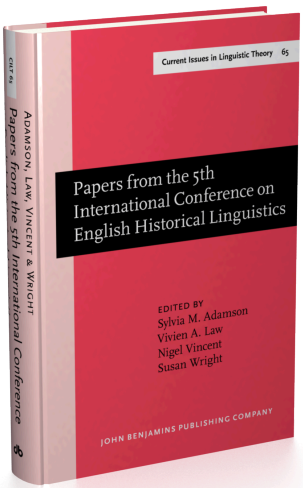

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IN MEMORIAM JAMES PETER THORNE
1933-1988

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The paper that Professor Thorne gave to the Fifth International Conference on English Historical Linguistics, in Cambridge, on 9 April 1987, 'Some Modern English filters', was, to the best of my knowledge, the last one that he ever delivered, and the last that he himself prepared for publication. Indeed, it was during the Conference that he was first alerted to the possible seriousness of the symptoms of which he had been complaining for some time, and it was only a few days later, on his return to Edinburgh, that their actual seriousness was confirmed and the cancer diagnosed which was to lead, indirectly, to his death eleven months later. It is therefore appropriate - poignantly appropriate for those who were with him at the Conference - that the volume which contains this particular paper should be dedicated to him. And on behalf of his many friends and colleagues, and also of

his family, I must begin by thanking the editors for having decided to dedicate the volume to him, and for having given me the opportunity of writing this brief tribute.[1]

James Peter Thorne was born on 29 January 1933 in Penarth, in South Wales. He was educated at Penarth Grammar School and at Jesus College, Oxford, where he graduated in English Language and Literature and subsequently obtained his B.Litt., the subject of his thesis being *Renaissance theories of logic and poetry*. After a brief period as a Research Fellow at Bedford College in London (1958-1959), he was appointed to an Assistant Lectureship in English Language in Edinburgh, where he spent the rest of his academic career (with, however, several periods abroad on secondment or as a visiting professor). In 1962 he was promoted to a full Lectureship, in 1970 to a Readership and in 1979, on the retirement of Professor Angus McIntosh, to the Forbes Chair of English Language. Among the more significant of his other academic appointments, may be listed the following: Assistant Directorship of the USAF Mechanical Analysis of Language Project, Indiana University (under the Directorship of Professor Fred W. Householder, 1961-1962); Visiting Associate Professorship, University of California at Berkeley (1967); Visiting Associate Professorship, University of California at San Diego (1969); LSA Visiting Professorship, University of Massachusetts, Amherst (Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1976); Visiting Professorship, University of Paris 3 (Nouvelle Sorbonne)

(1978-1979); Visiting Professorship, the National University of Singapore (1982 and 1985).

Such was his curriculum vitae, set out baldly in conventional obituary style. It remains to add, in the same vein, that his publications (some thirty articles and perhaps as many reviews) ranged over the fields of literary criticism, English philology, linguistics and the computational analysis of texts; that as the first Secretary of the School of Epistemics, in Edinburgh, in the early 1970s, he played an important part in the foundation and development of what has now become the University's world-famous centre for Cognitive Science; that at the time of his death, as well as being head of the English Language Department, he was also the Director of the Edinburgh University Gayre Institute in Medieval Dialectology and Convener of the Joint Universities Council for the Dictionary of the Older Scottish Tongue; and, finally, that, like any other established professor, he was, or had been, a member of several important committees and other bodies inside and outside the University, including the Council of the Philological Society and the Council for National Academic Awards (CNAA).

So much then, for a straightforward conventional account of his life and work. Presented in these terms, it might seem to be indistinguishable, to those who did not know him, from the life and work of any one of a host of successful university professors of his (and my) generation. But anyone who did know Jimmy Thorne (and 'Jimmy' he was to all who could claim any degree of

acquaintance with him) would also know that he was far from being a typical professor. More to the point, in the present context, anyone who did not know him - anyone who had not been taught by him, had not heard him lecture or had never met him socially - would find it impossible, on the basis of a straightforward recital of his official appointments and a list of his publications, to account for the reputation and influence that he undoubtedly enjoyed, not to mention the affection and esteem in which he was universally held. Any appreciation of Jimmy's life and work must try to answer, on behalf of those that did know him, the perhaps unspoken question that arises in the mind of those who did not: What was there about him that was so special?

Some idea of the nature of Jimmy's work and of the basis of his academic reputation can of course be got from reading his publications, several of which are widely quoted and, reprinted in students' readers and anthologies, have now been made accessible to a larger audience. It is easy enough to see, sometimes even from the titles, that his intellectual interests were diverse and wide-ranging. A reading of the papers themselves will also show that his work was, not merely interdisciplinary, but also integrative and catalytic. The paper that appears in the present volume is typical in this respect: bringing to bear upon an issue of general import in theoretical linguistics a philologist's evidence from Middle English, it demonstrates a mastery of both disciplines and of two characteristically different modes of thought and

argument. Many of his published articles are of this kind: one thinks particularly of 'Stylistics and generative grammars' (1965), of 'The grammar of jealousy: a note on the character of Leontes' (1977) or of 'A computer model for the perception of syntactic structure' (1968). To say that such works are interdisciplinary would be almost to misrepresent them, for it would imply that there are, at least temporarily, real boundaries between currently established disciplines, between linguistics and literary criticism, or between philology and computer science; and in his own thinking Jimmy did not recognize the existence of such interdisciplinary boundaries. As a graduate student at Oxford, many years ago, he had reconciled for himself the conflicting attitudes that divided the two factions in the Renaissance battle of the books. One of his abiding and passionate interests was poetry, which he not only read, but wrote (never, as far as I know, for publication). But sensitive though he was as a reader of poetry and skilled practitioner though he was of literary criticism, he never felt any conflict between what is referred to, in the jargon of school and university curricula, as language and literature. Not for him the philosophy-will-clip-an-angel's-wings philosophy! This much is clear, as I have said, even from the titles of some of his better-known articles.

But his publications give only a very partial view of the range and quality of his interests. Regrettably, there is nothing apart from his very early paper, 'A Ramistical commentary on Sidney's *Apology for Poetry* ' (1957), to testify to the deep knowledge of

scholastic and Renaissance theories of language and logic that he acquired when he was working on his B.Litt. dissertation. (This work ought to have earned him a Ph.D. and no doubt would have done, if it had been more respectful of the conventional disciplinary boundaries.) By the early 1970s there was a greater interest in the history of linguistics than there had been a generation previously; there was also by then a greater awareness on the part of linguists and philosophers of the importance and renewed topicality of scholastic logic and grammatical theory; and at that time Jimmy did consider revising and updating his dissertation for publication. But writing did not come easy to him at the best of times (he was a perfectionist and agonized over every phrase), and he abandoned the project. It so happens that, by the accident of my own upbringing and school-education (rather than from having studied classics and comparative philology at university), I too had some knowledge of scholastic philosophy (though superficial by comparison with his) when I first met Jimmy (in 1961). One of our earliest topics of conversation, and one to which we frequently returned in the years that followed, had to do with the links between the aims of Chomskyan generativism and those of the speculative grammarians of the later Middle Ages.(Chomsky himself was, of course, completely unaware of these links - as he was also unaware, at that time, of the work of his Cartesian and Humboldtian predecessors.) For me, therefore, it is the absence from Jimmy's 'Nachlass' of any major work on the history and philosophy of linguistics, written from this viewpoint, that is the most to be regretted.(I should

perhaps add, for the record, that, although Jimmy was one of the earliest fully-committed adherents of generativism in this country, and one of its most influential advocates in the early 1960s, it was Michael Halliday's lectures in Edinburgh in 1959-1961 that first excited his interest in modern linguistics. Jimmy himself readily acknowledged his indebtedness to Halliday, as he also acknowledged his indebtedness to his other Edinburgh mentor, Angus McIntosh, whose chair he was in later years proud to occupy.) But there are many other topics upon which he conversed and lectured with authority that are not represented in his published writings. And it is as a lecturer and as a conversationalist that he will be remembered. *Scripta absunt; verba manent!*

I have said that writing did not come easily to him. It may surprise many of those who heard him lecture that he did not find lecturing all that easy either. He was of course an outstandingly successful lecturer, with a style that was unique to him; histrionic and inspirational (in the best sense of both of these words), rather than soundly and conventionally discursive; allusive, rather than transparently erudite. But the platform fluency for which he was justly renowned was far from being as spontaneous as, in performance, it appeared. It was the product of long and careful preparation ('rehearsal' is perhaps a better word - the "actor-like qualities" of his lectures, it has been said, "raised memories of Richard Burton".[2] Nor was it only the prestigious set lecture or conference paper that he prepared with such care. The

same thought and time went into the preparation of his day-to-day teaching, both in his own Department in Edinburgh and also in the several universities in which he held visiting appointments. Many of his students, in this country and abroad, are by now well established in fields of research and scholarship to which Jimmy first introduced them, but which they have since made thoroughly their own and to which, in many cases, they have made strikingly original contributions. He was proud of them; and they, I am sure, will remember him with gratitude and affection.

So too will all those - and, happily, they were many - who were privileged to know him and enjoy his conversation. For conversation was Jimmy's forte: conversation of all kinds, from casual everyday gossip with close friends to high-level intellectual discussion with specialists in an astonishingly wide range of disciplines. Much of his very considerable knowledge of up-to-date research in fields other than English studies and linguistics derived from conversation with experts, many of them friends of long standing; and much of the knowledge of linguistics that he propagated among representatives of other disciplines was similarly transmitted in conversation. It was not for nothing that (working closely with Christopher Longuet-Higgins, its Chairman) he was such a successful Secretary of the School of Epistemics in its early days.

On a more personal and social level, Jimmy was not merely an amusing companion and an accomplished raconteur of well-chosen anecdotes, but also and always

a sympathetic and interested listener. His outward cheerfulness concealed, however, an inner melancholy, which not surprisingly in the circumstances of his illness, took a firm grip on him in the last months of his life and made them painfully unendurable. He died on 11 March 1988.

They told me, Heraclitus, they told me you were dead,...

I do not know what Jimmy thought of Callimachus's elegy, which, in Cory's translation (or paraphrase), he must have learned at school, as we all did in those days. But, as I have now frequently remarked to mutual friends, every line of this elegy seems relevant. Have we not all, in company with him, so often *tired the sun with talking and sent him down the sky*? And can we not all take comfort from the knowledge that his *nightingales still live?* (Here, to evoke a purely private memory that he shared and treasured, I translate literally from the penultimate line of the original Greek: 'nightingales' in its intended metaphorical sense of "utterances" or, as Cory puts it, "voices" will, of course, command more public assent, and I continue it, and conclude, with the more familiar final line from the Cory version.)

For Death, he taketh all away, but them he cannot take.

NOTES

1. In preparing this tribute, I have had before me, and have drawn freely upon, the Memorial Address delivered by Professor K.A. Fowler at the Funeral on 18 March 1988, the obituaries by Alan Davies (*The Times*, 29 March 1988) and Norman Macleod (*Edinburgh University Bulletin*, May 1988; *The Scotsman*, 6 April 1988; *The Independent*, 24 March 1988); and recent *curriculum vitae* and list of publications kindly supplied to me by Norman Macleod and Virginia Barnes, the late Professor Thorne's secretary. But most of what I have written is based solely on personal knowledge, and the judgements that I make are my own.

2. Alan Davies, *The Times*, 29 March 1988.