

JAMES R. LAWLER

1929–2013



PHOTO: AAH

Many of my generation discovered the beauty and variety of French verse through an anthology published by Oxford University Press in 1960, which sported unforgettably on its cover a fountain, its water enthusiastically spurting up only to fall neatly back into its vase. The fountain was symbolic of the exuberance of much great poetry, however strictly contained it may be. In addition to the breadth of poetry included in this slim volume, it is remarkable for placing the explanatory paragraph about each poem after the piece itself, thus generously allowing the reader to reach his or her own appreciation first. That approach was typical of the anthology's compiler, James R. Lawler – typical of his openness of mind and of the respect with which he treated his students. It is also characteristic of his openness of mind about poetry itself. 'Poetry', he once remarked, 'is very meaningful to us – it is not meant for museums and libraries, but should be brought into our lives. There are plenty of lessons in poetry that are there to be read and discussed in their diversity. There is joy in reading and thinking through things in the company of poets. They use the simplest words – bread, trees, sky – yet these little words go to the heart of consciousness.' From an early age, Jim was fascinated

by that combination of simplicity and depth that marks the greatest poetry: as a twelve-year-old in Melbourne, he wandered into a bookshop and bought a copy of *Paradise Lost* and poetry remained central to his teaching and research interests throughout his life.

Born in 1929, Jim was fortunate enough to have been an undergraduate at the University of Melbourne at one of its finest hours, especially for students of French. At that time the chair of French was held by A. R. Chisholm, whose impact on French studies in Melbourne and in Australia generally was both profound and lasting. A student and life-long friend of the poet Christopher Brennan, one of the first Australians to appreciate the beauty of Stéphane Mallarmé's poetry, Chisholm went on to publish studies on Mallarmé, Rimbaud and Valéry, all three of whom would be central to Jim's research. After graduating, Jim went to Paris to prepare a *doctorat de l'université* on the then little-known poet, Guillaume Apollinaire. Speaking about that choice of poet, he remarked: 'Apollinaire had died in 1918, and his widow and many of his friends were still alive. I was able to talk with them, to hear his voice on records, to visit places he had visited. He had come to Paris as a foreigner, as I did, and so he loved French with a freshness that I felt I had as well.' He was awarded the doctorate in 1954 and returned to Australia. After teaching at the University of Melbourne, he was appointed Professor of French Studies at the University of Western Australia in 1963, a position he held until 1971. During his time at the University of Western Australia he founded the highly-respected periodical, *Essays in French Literature*. From there he moved to the United States, where he was appointed to a post at the University of California (Los Angeles), and then to Nova Scotia, Canada, where he took up a position at Dalhousie University. In 1979, he founded another prestigious review, *Dalhousie French Studies*. In that year, too, he made his last professional move, to the University of Chicago, where he became Edward Carson Waller Distinguished Service Professor in Romance Languages and Literatures. After retirement he returned to France, a country he loved and whose language he spoke with exceptional beauty and felicity. Even in 'retirement' he was still active, becoming Président of both the Association internationale des études Françaises and the Association des amis de

Rimbaud, further proof of the standing in which he was held by the French. The French government recognised his considerable contribution by making him an Officier des palmes académiques and awarding him the Prix international des amitiés françaises. In 1999 the extremely prestigious Académie française chose him as the recipient of the Prix du rayonnement de la langue française.

Jim was a foundation member of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, and enjoyed a reputation as one of the finest scholars of French poetry from Charles Baudelaire to Yves Bonnefoy. Among his many remarkable publications, he will be remembered for the 1963 *Lecture de Valéry: une étude de Charmes; The Language of French Symbolism* which he published in 1969 and which reveals his considerable powers of synthesis; *Rene Char: The Myth and the Poem* of 1978; *Rimbaud's Theatre of the Self* (1992), his fine reading of the work of Arthur Rimbaud as defined by the masks and personas the poet adopted; and in 1997 *Poetry and Moral Dialectic: Baudelaire's 'secret architecture'*. In addition, Jim contributed many valuable journal articles on writers as diverse as Poe and Bonnefoy, Apollinaire and Claudel. One of the finest of these is an article he wrote in 1984 for *Yale French Studies* in a number edited by Sima Godfrey on the theme of the anxiety of anticipation. Jim's article takes its title, 'An Ever Future Hollow in the Soul', from lines by Paul Valéry. While Valéry is the main focus of the article, it ranges with ease and eloquence over a wide field of poets – Mallarmé, Baudelaire, Hugo, Poe – to explore what others might term the anxiety of influence, but

which is called here, in Valéry's own terminology, 'a decisive spiritual conquest'.

Jim was also a translator, leaving for example a fine version of Paul Claudel's *Connaissance de l'est*, in a 2004 Princeton University Press publication entitled *Knowing the East*. The introduction to this work opens with a sentence that is typically Jim in being succinctly powerful, beautifully balanced and intriguing enough to draw the reader irresistibly in: 'The East that Claudel came to know was not a passing fancy.'

Despite his considerable erudition, Jim remained one of the most straight-forward and unpretentious of men, a fine human being with a wonderful sense of humour. I remember sharing a taxi with him during the Melbourne Mallarmé conference in 1998. The taxi driver was loudly and jingoistically scandalised on learning that Jim lived in France. 'Why ever would you want to live there, mate?' he asked incredulously. 'My wife is French' replied Jim, mildly. 'If my wife was French I'd bloody well make her live here' was the truculent reply. Ever diplomatic, Jim calmly turned the conversation, to my considerable astonishment, to football. 'Poetry', Jim had once said, 'has many different aspects. It is not just language – it is psychology, philosophy, history.' In this case it clearly had provided him with sufficient psychology and philosophy to deal with a Melbourne taxi driver.

He is survived by his twin children, Jérôme and Ariane.

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