

# Stephen Watson: Poet, scholar and critic (1954–2011)

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Stephen Watson, who has died aged 56 in Cape Town, was a poet, scholar, critic and academic of independence and distinction. In his life, as in his writing and teaching, he was wide-ranging and generous; he was a prodigious expeditionary walker, an expositor of comparative literatures and genres, a much-loved mentor to many emerging writers, a profound listener and a vigilant ironist of contemporary and local society. Privately he was a poet and essayist, an ambassador for poetry and by extension a diplomat for South African letters. Publically he was a professor of English at the University of Cape Town (UCT) and Director of its Centre for Creative Writing.

Watson was born in Cape Town in 1954, grew up and was educated there. His home city and its hinterland became for him an abiding locus of intellectual and writerly concern. The Cape's distance from the metropolitan centres of economic power and English literature, its irredeemable provincialism, the despoiling colonialism of its being, its extremes of social nightmare and geographical dream – all these became the occasion and the subject of his poetry, essays, critical stance and academic output.

His poetry, more than any other, returned again and again to the reception and construction of the landscape of the city, the Cedarberg, and to the social and historical worlds underlying them. So, too, did his essays, whether anatomising provincial 'melancholy' or logging the 'day-long' valleys of the Cedarberg in which he walked, thought, wrote and, on election day in 1994, voted and planted a cedar tree. One volume of poems was entitled *In this city*, and in 2005 he published an edited collection of essays on Cape Town, *A city imagined*. His published diary for the year 1996 (*A writer's diary*) roved across continents and ages, from New York to Australia, ancient Chinese poets to Vermeer, but at heart, as in most of its composition, it hunkered down in Cape Town and Kromrivier in the Cedarberg. In a single day's reflection Watson could cross from the ubiquitous Cape weather to the proceedings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission or the Bosnian situation, and almost always back through the bewildering ranges of his reading: Pound, the newspaper, Camus, Sophocles, Kundera, Didion, Montale and Julian of Norwich. In the last weeks of his life he won the Thomas Pringle award for his memoir of a love affair in his student days; characteristically its title bundled biography and geography together: 'Buiten street', it is called.

That essay, as its title hints, is no less characteristically ('no less' was a stylistic characteristic of Watson, a verbal tic) about far more than late adolescent love, or the demolition and development of the urban landscape. It is an essay on *outsideness*, on loss and injury, an exercise that remembers writing itself as among 'the rituals of the lost' and brings its readers, without a word from its author, to the generality of every kind of forced removal and demolition. Before beginning his undergraduate degree at UCT, Watson spent several months as a hospital orderly testing a vocation in medicine. In many ways for many readers, it might seem now that he did not so much decide against medicine as for a medicine of poetry. Watson was a great poet of the body and of the planet, things he came to first as conditions of solitude, in all its forms. Even the earth whose presence he felt acutely and which he addressed, whether in joy or with grave concern for its well-being, as that which underwrote all his work, was for him an integrity, in a mathematical as much as a moral sense. Thinking and writing, Watson was candid about the solitariness that attends independence, the knowledge of being alone that troubles the mystery of there being something rather than nothing at all.

And yet Watson was far from disengaged. In the running tide of the 1980s he bore against the current of the orthodoxies of the academic left, and garnered an image of the disengaged liberal, a kind of aesthetic libertarian, threatened with a good swamping or ducking. Typically independent and intellectually scrupulous then, as ever, much of his contrariness, whether about Marxism or the malnourishment of 'Black' poetry in the household of the struggle, came to seem prescient. The contortions and accommodations of Marxism after the Wall came down at decade's end, and the positions of Albie Sachs and Njabulo Ndebele, which seemed late when they came to



revise the politics of culture in South Africa, were things that Watson had anticipated. Moreover he did so out of a growing intimacy with the literature of the eastern bloc, with a formidable scholarly background as a Marxist himself, and with a PhD on Black South African poetry.

Watson's criticism was tonic, and more even-handed than his detractors might have told from his polemic. At UCT he continued to teach Marxist literary criticism for years after forsaking 'the faith', and communicated to many an enthusiasm for its muscularity and history. Aspects of the Frankfurt School never left his own forms of thinking, however far he travelled from its originating content. So, too, did Watson work harder than anyone to stimulate and nurture poetry through and after those years. He did so by building bridges between generations and continents, by keeping elders in conversation with their challengers, by doorstepping the Les Murrays and Kevin Harts in Australia, by meeting up with his admired Milosz, by translating Szyborska, by writing about and teaching such eastern bloc dissidents as Milan Kundera and Zbigniew Herbert, by delighting in the work of an obscure Frisian poet he met at Poetry International, by dispersing letters and books and new names.

Most of all, in his last decade Watson was the powerhouse behind UCT's emergence as a creative writing school. Poet after poet went through his hands, novelists and non-fiction writers were skillfully allocated. Book after book saw publication, and some share of the credit for the remarkable health – once unforeseeable – of local publishing and the life of letters is surely now due to him. His academic interests lay far beyond specialisation: he wrote on Dante, Eliot, Camus, Polish poetry, Larkin, Hemingway, Leonard Cohen and Cavafy, and he taught on Auden, South American novelists, Marxist literary criticism and South African literature. He was one of the earliest critics and expositors of Coetzee, and it was his happy task to talk to international reporters as if the matter were old news when Coetzee won the Nobel Prize during Watson's tenure as head of the English Department at UCT.

Of Watson's own poetry it might be said that he came uncommonly quickly into his own voice. His first volume, *Poems*, in which so many stanzas are left hanging on ellipses, is not an exercise in the tentativity of youth. In those elusive, inconclusive, elliptical gestures are rooted the long lines and copious stanzas of Watson's most characteristic poetry – lines rolling like audaciously prolonged shots in the script of consciousness, successive clauses probing and reconditioning, chasing and refining each image and the

idea for which it stands. In time the capaciousness of the Watson line has come to seem more a way and a capacity, the way words abhor the vacuums in human understanding and their capacity to flow into them. The net result of those accumulations was a turn of phrase specifically Watsonian in aural and intellectual 'feel' – something striven for and well-won, hard-wearing and unashamedly beautiful or humbling. In his last days, using a different and typically better metaphor, Watson spoke of writing as having always offered his best hope of a way through the labyrinth. In invoking the string of Theseus he might as well have been offering a summatory analysis of his own style, and one as true of his prose as his poetry.

In 1991 Watson published *Return of the moon*, a book of poetry offering versions from the /Xam collations of Bleek and Lloyd. That undertaking not only produced some of his finest poetry and an introduction of the greatest academic importance, but, along with the first volume of essays that closely preceded it, marked a stylistic and critical watershed. The poetry after *Return of the moon* is liberated to the formal experiment and range begun in the versions from the /Xam, and becomes more surprising, as can be seen in his last collection, *The light echo*. So too in his prose Watson felt he was truly coming into his own in *The music in the ice*, the volume of essays which appeared at the end of last year, and now at the end of his life. Remarkable in that collection is his access into 'The heart of Albert Camus', the culmination of a lifetime's attention to that man's work and life, as also a couple of biographical excursions that now, along with his untimely death, draw his own work into the company of the French writer.

Watson will be remembered by those who knew him for his abiding generosity and kindness. He had no love of a big stage and confessed to dreading public speaking. He loathed reading his own poems. In his twenties he spent some months crossing the Alps alone, a psychological expedition as much as a physical one. He was bitten on his hand by an adder there and typically walked on through a few days of delirium and pain, as fascinated by the state of being as threatened by it. All his life he walked the Cedarberg, sometimes in company, sometimes alone. In his last decade he visited the Himalayas and became familiar with the Amatola of the Eastern Cape. He was a more than tidy athlete in his youth and went on to run marathons and swim in False Bay. Physical as much as personal courage sustained him and those around him in his last months as cancer rapidly overran him.

His homes had fires in the grate and were full of books for the lending. In his last home there were also his two young children and his wife Tanya, whom he adored.