

## AVANT-PROPOS

This special issue of the *Romanic Review* gathers texts written in tribute to Philip Watts, who was professor of French in the Department of French and Romance Philology at Columbia University. Phil passed away on Saturday, July 20, 2013, at the tragically early age of fifty-two.

After a memorial service held at Saint Paul Chapel and Columbia's Maison Française on September 9, 2013, Phil's colleagues and friends wanted to pay tribute to him not only for his unparalleled human qualities, but also in recognition of his life as a scholar. We did not want his humility, generosity, tact, and sense of humor to eclipse his work as teacher, literary critic, movie viewer, historian of literature, and reader of all kinds of texts—scholarly, literary, and otherwise. All of these were activities in which he excelled and which left a lasting and powerful impact on countless students, colleagues, and readers.

Phil Watts received his BA in 1982 from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and his PhD from Columbia in 1991. From 1992 to 2006, he taught at the University of Pittsburgh, where he became chair of the Department of French and Italian. In 2007, he returned to Columbia as professor of French. As chair from 2008 to 2012, he led the department with intellectual rigor and professional dedication and, above all, with a deep sense of humanity.

A specialist of twentieth-century French literature and film, Phil published on numerous subjects in this area. His first book, *Allegories of the Purge: How Literature Responded to the Postwar Trials of Writers and Intellectuals in France* (Stanford University Press, 1998), was awarded the Aldo and Jeanne Scaglione Prize. He then continued to study how literature and film participate in democratic formations, publishing articles on Jean Genet, Jacques Rancière, Roland Barthes and film, Jacques Rivette and the Cold War, and the films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet. With Gabriel Rockhill, he coedited *Jacques Rancière: History, Politics, Aesthetics* (Duke University Press, 2009) and with Joe Golsan, an issue of *Yale French Studies* entitled *Literature and History: Around Suite Française and Les Bienveillantes* (Yale University Press, 2012).

At the time of his death, Phil was working on two different projects. The first one, *Remnants of Tragedy*, focuses on the persistence of aesthetic classicism in postwar French literature and film; part of this was published in *Yale French Studies* (vol. 121, 2012). The second one, *Roland Barthes's Cinema*, will be

edited by a group of colleagues and friends based on the manuscript he left and will include a preface by Jacques Rancière. It will be published by Oxford University Press in 2016. A French version of the work, translated by his wife Sophie Queuniet, will be published by Bayard in 2015 in the series “Logique des images.”

The present volume is divided into three parts. The first part constitutes an attempt to bring to fruition one of Phil’s last projects: a special issue on the memory of World War II in contemporary French culture, which Phil was unable to complete due to his illness. Building on Phil’s concept for the volume, Joe Golsan has attempted to realize at least a version of what Phil had in mind by gathering works by other scholars and friends working in the area of the history and memory of World War II.

The second part gathers tributes that, for the most part, were given at a memorial roundtable entitled “Reading (with) Phil Watts,” held at Columbia’s Maison Française on March 8, 2014. The intention of the speakers that day was to remember—and take inspiration from—his scholarly work. All contributions thus more or less follow the template of “reading Phil Watts reading X’s work.”

The third part of the issue is a republication of an article by Phil Watts, originally published in a volume entitled *Camus Now* in 2011, edited by Thomas Bishop and Coralie Girard. We wanted to include this text for several reasons. First of all, it perfectly illustrates Phil’s qualities as a reader; it is typical of his work in the way it combines erudition with sensitivity to the connection between poetics and politics. In this article, Phil identifies, for the first time, the Fernandel comedy that, in *L’Etranger*, Meursault goes to see on the day after his mother’s death. Meursault’s choice to go to this film plays a key role in the prosecutor’s indictment of him in his closing speech, resulting in his execution and death. As is so often the case in Phil’s writings, attention to detail is never gratuitous; it reveals the broad implications of seemingly small nuances. The other reason for republishing this text is that, in the most ambitious version of the prospective table of contents of his *Roland Barthes’s Cinema*, Phil had envisioned an opening chapter entitled “Prehistory,” which would have covered the writings on cinema of Camus, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty. Phil was sensitive to Barthes’s intermediate generational positioning: born in 1915, Barthes started writing about movies somewhere between the generation of Deleuze, Badiou, and Rancière—for whom he was, in a way, setting the stage by helping to make cinema an acceptable object for theoretical thought—and the earlier generation of Camus, Sartre, and Merleau-Ponty, whose relationship to cinema was much more ambivalent. These thinkers were sometimes enamored by movies (Sartre wrote his text “Apologie pour le cinéma” as early as 1924) but also distrustful of a new medium that risked becoming, in Phil’s own words, an “opiate of the people,” a “distraction for

the bourgeoisie,” and also “a kind of failed distraction,” the “futile desire (*vain désir*) for escape” that Sartre describes in *La Nausée*.<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, this promising early chapter won’t be included in *Roland Barthes’s Cinema* because it was in too much of a draft stage to be reused in the final version of the book. Republishing and hopefully expanding the readership of Phil’s article on Camus allows us to end the volume with Phil’s own words and voice. This volume honors a remarkable intellectual life cut short by an untimely death that left behind both a promise of what might have been and a source of abiding inspiration to others.

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1. Paris: Gallimard, Folio, 1972, 79.