Spinning Legends...telling truths
Reading As I Lay Dying

for JGW, 16 June 1939-30 March 2010

I have been reading As I Lay Dying
For the very first time. It’s great. I realize
Telling you this is a lot like saying
To me, “His Lear’s quite good; I may be trying
His Hamlet, too, one of these days.”
Perhaps what I’ve been doing is re-reading?

You’ve never been one for the little lies
Professors tell to go on seeming knowing.
Our habit from the years of barely staying
Ahead of students, and with friends, evading
Attention to the holes left in our reading.
What we don’t know is not what we like saying.

But these spring days as light keeps growing
Brighter on the bed where you lie reading
There’s not much time for little or big lying
Between you and all of us you’re leading
On toward the darkness at the end of trying
Beyond anything we can be truly knowing.
It’s a different kind of truth you’re wanting
As you lie reading.

True that we all will take the road you’re taking.
True that it’s yours alone you must be walking,
Hobbling, now, with the clotting and the swelling.
These are not the truths that you are wanting.

We bring instead our stories of your teaching
And set you into stories of our teaching,
Ignoring cancer, focusing on honor,
As if we all were characters in Homer.
Not asking questions none of us can answer,
You’d rather speak of the endowed professor
Who in an institutional forever
In academic deeds will always name you.
The phone rang yesterday while we were talking,
And knowing that a friend had tried to reach you,
You picked up, listened, answered the cold-caller,
Your voice gentle, final, and forbearing,
"Sir, I cannot help you."
It was well said, but not for saying to you.

"He was my hero," you said the day you told me,
Remembering your surgeon father's dying.
He too gives his name to a professor.
You held his scalpel hand and told him,
"You are the best." Breathless with emphysema,
Self-knowing, irritable, not in terror,
"That's a god-damned lie," he gathered voice to say,
His final words.

From what I know of you and him
It may in some ways have been an error
But you were not lying.

Jim, we are not lying.

10 March 2010