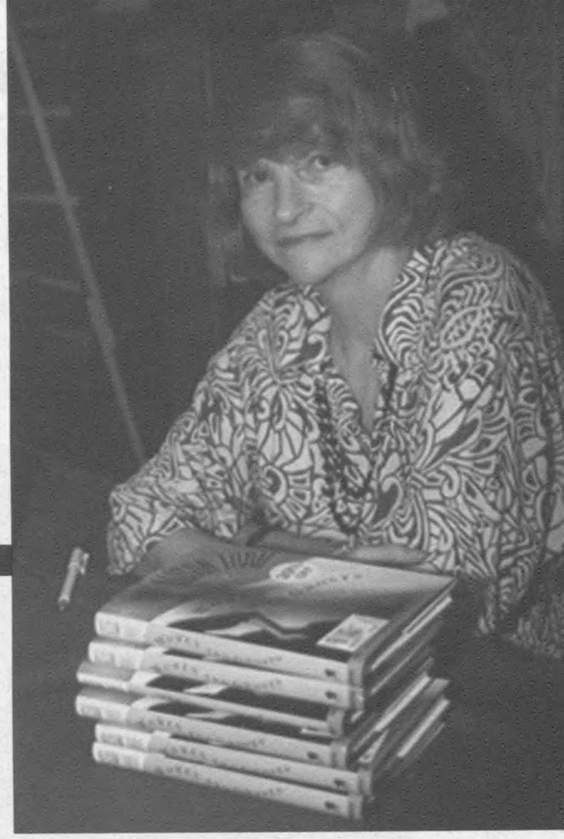
ENGLISH

AT CORNELL

A NEWSLETTER FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

SUMMER 1998



Special Topic: LITERARY LIVES

Alison Lurie: Looking Back

PAUL SAWYER

Alison Lurie, one of the most widely celebrated living American novelists, is retiring from Cornell after nearly three decades as a teacher of literature and creative writing. She is the author of nine works of fiction, with a tenth due for publication in June. Her fifth novel, *The War Between the Tates* (1974), was set in Ithaca and became a best-seller; her seventh novel, *Foreign Affairs*, won the Pulitzer Prize in 1985. She has also written several works for children, a study of children's literature called *Don't Tell the Grown-Ups*, a social history of clothing, and articles in the *New York Review of Books* and other magazines; and she has edited a collection called *Clever Gretchen and Other Forgotten Folktales*—stories whose heroines are neither helpless nor dull but, as she writes, can "defeat giants, answer riddles, outwit the Devil, and rescue their friends and relatives from all sorts of dangers and evil spells." In the following interview she looks back over her two careers as writer and teacher.

Paul Sawyer: *You've taught at Cornell since 1969. What changes have you noticed in the undergraduates over that time?*

Alison Lurie: They haven't changed all that much essentially. They have remained intelligent, lively, with wide interests—they are the kind of students professors love. When I began to teach, many of my students were radicals and hippies; they then gradually became more conservative on the average. By the early 1980s they were quite square, and even right-wing, and then they began moving left again. In the early seventies I wanted to tell my students that you didn't necessarily write better on LSD, and graduate school wasn't prison. Ten years later I wanted to tell them to loosen up, that grades weren't the only thing in the world, and it might not be a bad idea to take off a year or two after college and see the world. The pendulum swings back and forth.

What's it been like teaching in the MFA program?

Wonderful. We get the best writers; we take only about one out of twelve applicants now. They're all different, but all gifted. They have full support, and several years in which they have lots of time to write, and so many of them go on to become fine writers. It's exciting to teach them, and see them being inspired by one another. It seems as if every month or so another novel or collection of stories by a former Cornell MFA is being published. Among current MFA authors that I've taught, for instance, are Melissa Bank, Junot Diaz, Mingfong Ho, Lorrie Moore, Nina Revoyr, Stuart O'Nan, Micah Perks, and Julie Schumacher—and there are surely others I don't know about, including many poets.

Teaching writing to undergraduates is a lot of fun, too. They're all intelligent and interesting, and some of them have talent. Most of them won't become writers themselves, but they become good critics and better readers.

Is it possible to teach writing in a seminar?

You can't teach innate ability, but you can teach some of the standard techniques. You can look at someone's writing and suggest other ways of doing things—for instance, that there are many different possible points of view, and many different ways of establishing character. You can notice where a writer's strengths and weaknesses are. Some people need to work on dialogue, by listening to people talk and recording this; others need to learn how to make a scene physically vivid by appealing to many different senses.

Has being a teacher of writing affected your own work?

No, not directly. But it does tell me what my students are reading, what kind of work excites them, since I always ask them to bring in passages they like. I hear of new writers from them, and I keep track of changing tastes. I notice lately, for instance, that fewer of my students bring in experimental writing, or attempt it themselves—they don't read authors I admire like John Barth and Donald Barthelme. On the other hand, their tastes are becoming much more international—they keep up with Asian and Latin American literature. This is partly because of the way college curriculums have changed; students are exposed to a much wider range of literatures, even as undergraduates. Literature is much more international than it was when I was a student. On the other hand, partly because of this, it's even harder for a new writer to get published, because he or she must compete with other authors from all over the world.

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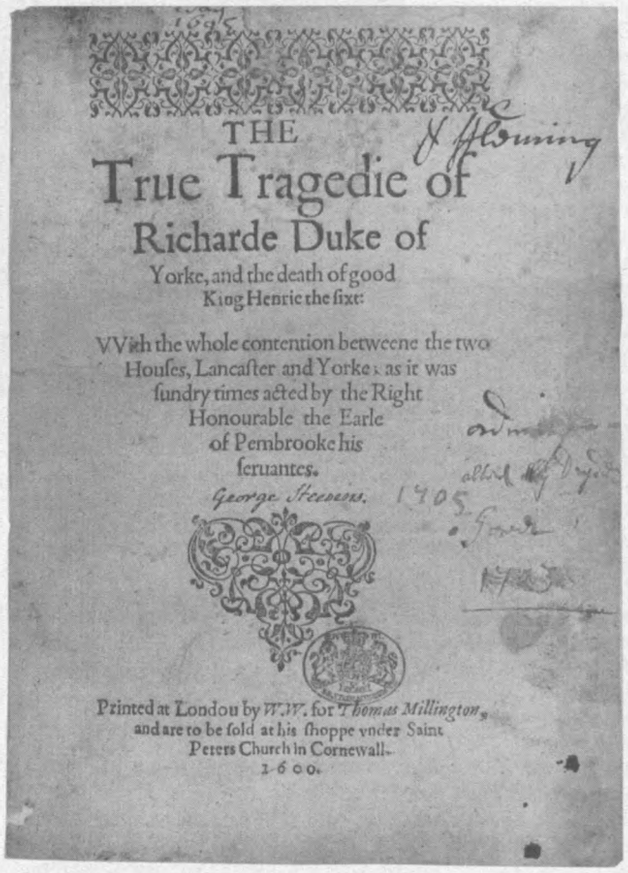
Shakespeare and the Queen's Men

SCOTT MCMILLIN

What was Shakespeare doing as a young man, during his eight "lost years"? Scott McMillin provides an intriguing answer to this question that also casts light on the origin of his art—what Professor McMillin calls the revolution in Tudor theatre of the 1590s. This essay will be part of a book, *The Queen's Men,* coauthored with Sally-Beth MacLean of the University of Toronto, to be published later this year by Cambridge University Press.



THE
True Tragedie of
Richarde Duke of
Yorke, and the death of good
King Henrie the sixt:

VVith the whole contention betweene the two
Houses, Lancaster and Yorke, as it was
sundry times acted by the Right
Honourable the Earle
of Pembrooke his
seruantes.

George Steevens. 1795

Printed at London by W.W. for Thomas Millington,
and are to be sold at his shoppe vnder Saint
Peters Church in Cornewall.
1600.

No one knows when Shakespeare first came to London, or with which acting company he began his career. The "lost years" of the Shakespeare biography extend from later 1584, when his twins were conceived in Stratford, to 1592, when a popular London writer, Robert Greene, complained about him as the "only Shakescene in a country" and an "upstart crow." What made him an upstart for Greene was that this common actor had the audacity to try writing plays. Greene was a playwright, too, and he was writing his complaint to other playwrights, but none of them had started out as mere actors. They had all been to university instead. But Shakespeare was only an actor in the first place, and now he was pretending that he could "bombast out a blank verse" with his betters.

Greene does not identify the acting company in which this piece of braggadocio was being carried out, and we have no independent evidence on the matter. In 1592 and 1593, not long after the Greene attack, some Shakespearean titles occur in the repertories being played by Lord Strange's men and Sussex's men at the Rose playhouse, so we are free to speculate that Shakespeare was with those companies, but the first documentary evidence is a warrant of payment for him as a leading member of a newly formed company known as the Chamberlain's men in 1594.

Where he was between 1584 and 1592 is a huge question. The "lost years" cover Shakespeare between ages twenty and twenty-eight—important years in the development of anyone, crucial years in the development of a writer. Where did that development occur? With which company did he launch his acting career, and with which company did he take up the writing of plays with sufficient impact to draw the ire of Robert Greene?

Biographers have long wondered if Shakespeare's original acting company might have been the most famous organization of the 1580s, the all-star troupe that acted under the name of Queen Elizabeth herself. Shakespeare was approaching his nineteenth birthday when the Queen's men were formed. He was still living in Stratford-upon-Avon, where his wife of a few months was expecting their first child in a few weeks. But the Queen's men came to Stratford fairly often during the mid and later eighties, and Shakespeare must have seen their plays as they came through. The speculation that he joined up with the company on one of their visits has proved impossible for scholars to resist. This is the "Hi diddle di di, the actor's life for me" theory of Shakespeare's entry into the theatre. It assumes that the fascination of joining a touring band of famous players was so great that he left wife and child in Stratford and set out to see the world and make a living in the theatre. He could have joined any company that played Stratford, of course, but a touch of documentary support for the Queen's men was added in 1961 when it was discovered that a leading member of the Queen's men, William Knell, had been killed in a fight shortly before the company came to Stratford in 1587. (He had been killed by another member of the Queen's men—to be in an all-star troupe was not to be on Cloud 9.) Did Shakespeare take the late Knell's place and go to London with the Queen's men? The speculation has been hard to resist, but while it is true that Knell died and that Shakespeare got to London, there is no evidence that Shakespeare got to London *because* Knell died. And the probability of an unknown from a country town replacing a leading actor of the day is not strong.

Here is some circumstantial evidence to ponder. The plots of six of Shakespeare's known plays are closely related to the plots of plays performed by the Queen's men. There are nine extant Queen's-men plays. Four of these are about English history. *The Troublesome Reign of John, The True Tragedy of Richard III, King Leir,* and *The Famous Victories of Henry V.* These are the Queen's men plays holding close resemblances to Shakespearean plays: *King John* resembles *The Troublesome Reign* virtually scene for scene. *King Lear* and *Richard III* cover the same stories as *King Leir* and *The True Tragedy of Richard III.* The sequence of *1 Henry IV, 2 Henry IV,* and *Henry V* is in part an elaborate version of the material covered in *The Famous Victories of Henry V.* The plays of the Queen's men are the largest theatrical source of Shakespeare's plots—if they came first and are not themselves reactions to the Shakespeare texts. For there is a "bad quarto theory" current in modern textual scholarship, which holds that some printed plays were stolen from "good" originals and, as the theory falls out, the "good" versions always came from Shakespeare and came before the "bad" stolen versions. The Queen's men plays that bear resemblance to Shakespearean plays have been called "bad" quartos stolen from the Shakespearean originals, but no one has explained who the thieves were, how they practiced their stealth, or why they should have had contact with the Queen's men, who were the most famous actors of their time and not much in need of petty criminals.

The fact is that the four Queen's men plays in question all appeared in print before their Shakespearean counterparts. They were probably the earlier plays, and Shakespeare probably lifted their plots. (He lifted almost all his plots from one printed source or another, usually from history books and prose romances.) There are

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and only nine published Queen's men plays in all—nearly half of them link up to Shakespeare. All of the plays that link up to Shakespeare are English history plays, the only English history plays extant from the Queen's men. Shakespeare seems to have known lines from all of these four plays, and he seems to have remembered their incidents in both his earlier and later work. Meredith Skura's shrewd psychoanalytic study *Shakespeare the Actor* detects the Queen's men King Leir not just in Shakespeare's Lear but in moments of *Richard II, Richard III, King John, Cymbeline,* and *Coriolanus*. His connection with the published texts of the Queen's men seems exceptionally close and deep. I think he was at hand when those plays were written. As an actor, he may have been in them. As an "upstart" actor, he may have had a hand in writing them, although not much of one. Their overall style resembles that of other playwrights of the day (Robert Greene, for one); but Shakespeare's style is different on some key points.

If one reads the plays of the Queen's men as a group, one discovers that they depend on a dramatic system that can look "bad" to readers trained on Shakespeare, but that is coherent and theatrical nevertheless. This system is marked by big visual effects punctuated by comic gags and stunts—a sort of Macy's-Thanksgiving-Day-Parade stagecraft combined with vaudeville routines (the Queen's men included Richard Tarlton, the most famous comic of his day, pictured at right). This dramaturgy is recognizable in its own terms, although it differs from the dramaturgy that Shakespeare, Marlowe, and others established in the 1590s—a dramaturgy that expanded the verbal limits of drama, especially blank-verse drama. Can you imagine a different kind of dramaturgy, a kind that is nonchalant about poetry, but is focused on the visual and the clownish instead? One that manages to be patriotic, too? And sentimental? Fans of musical comedy or Fourth of July concerts know the style of the Queen's men by heart. I call this style the "literalism of the theatre" because it uses the visual language of the stage as its primary text—the language of properties, of costumes, of pantomime, of comic pratfalls, of fireworks. Dramatic speech in these plays is often a sort of accompaniment to the visual signifiers—and that's what Marlowe, Kyd, and Shakespeare set about changing. The poets forged a revolution in which blank-verse took hold as the leading element of playmaking. They learned to write verse paragraphs filled with metaphor and paced by metrical variation. The younger actors of the day learned to speak this poetry as though it were spontaneous. The Queen's men never learned the new style. There was some overlap, of course—Shakespeare called upon visual effects, and the Queen's men called upon dramatic verse. But there is a difference of emphasis between the two styles, and the difference in emphasis can be seen and heard in the theatre.

For example, to deal with the mysterious appearance of five moons at the time of King John's second coronation in *The Troublesome Reign of John,* the Queen's men rigged up a display of the five moons themselves. That is theatrical literalism—letting the spectators see for themselves. Shakespeare's *King John* delivers this event not visually but narratively, describing the shuddering of a troubled society in images that could never be precisely seen on a stage:

> *And he that speaks doth gripe the hearer's wrist,*
>
> *Whilst he that hears makes fearful action,*
>
> *With wrinkled brows, with nods, with rolling eyes.*
>
> *I saw a smith stand with his hammer, thus,*
>
> *The whilst his iron did on the anvil cool,*
>
> *With open mouth swallowing a tailor's news . . .*
>
> *(Arden edition, IV, ii, 190–95).*

The question is what relationship holds between that piece of vivid narration and the display of the "five moons" in the Queen's-men play. The "five moons" display is not a "bad quarto" redaction of Shakespeare's lines, but a different kind of dramaturgy—a visual dramaturgy that makes its impact not with words so much as with an invention of visual stagecraft, some stunning use of flown properties and fireworks—a forerunner of the helicopter that lands in *Miss Saigon*. Shakespeare does not give you the five moons. If you wish to see the five moons, you must see the Queen's men's version. In Shakespeare, the stunning display comes across as words, and we listen to the event being described by an actor speaking verse; we do not see the event itself.

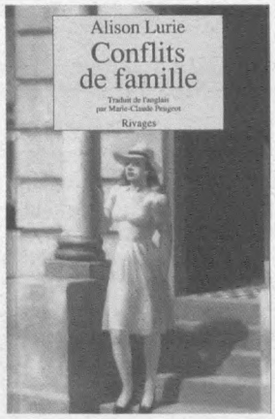
Why, then, did Shakespeare lift the plots from this resolutely old-fashioned company? And why did he know their plays so well? The possibility that he began his London career with the very company that eventually faded before the "Shakespearean" style is worth holding in mind, if only for the irony. That would explain his close knowledge of their plays. How might a young man from the country have got started with the most prestigious company of the time? Perhaps he held horses at the playhouse door, as someone later said he did. Perhaps he acted bit parts, and worked his way up to some better roles. Greene called him a "factotum" in addition to "player." Greene might have been exactly right. He was in position to know, having written at least one of the Queen's men plays himself. Greene also said that this player and factotum had the audacity to attempt blank verse of his own. This may have been right, too. It is not beyond question to suppose that the young man from the country did some writing for the Queen's company as a collaborator—not as a principal writer, but as a "patcher of other men's plays," let us say, who contributed here and there to the joint effort by which many Elizabethan plays got written. He would not have designed the plays or determined their style. He would have adapted his talent to a design and style set by others and set some time earlier, for this company was built according to "pre-Shakespearean" showmanship, and its talent was both famous and old-fashioned. A fledgling writer would not dictate to principal writers but would do what he could and would learn something from the effort—would learn, perhaps, that he did not want to write that way.

Look ahead a little. By 1600 the Chamberlain's men (the new company Shakespeare joined in 1594) were the number one troupe in London. What made them so famous? Their plays on English history. They were not known for tragedy—not yet—and their success in comedy could be matched by good comedies from their leading rivals, the Admiral's men. No other company was taking English history so far into popularity as were the Chamberlain's men of the 1590s, however, with their plays on the reigns of Richard II, Henry IV, Henry V, Henry VI, and Richard III, not to mention the one on King John.

The Queen's men had practically invented the English history play before Shakespeare came along. In lifting these plots, Shakespeare was lifting the old company's strong suit; then in rewriting the plots for the Chamberlain's men, he was inventing a new game for that suit to be played in. If he did begin his career with the Queen's men, he was pulling off an inside job, and that may be why Robert Greene, in addition to calling him "factotum" and "player," dropped a hint that he was also stealing something. It is only a speculation that the young Shakespeare was a Queen's man, but he certainly knew their plays, and he also knew what to do with them.

By the time the Chamberlain's men were staging their new history plays in the later 1590s, the Queen's men had lost their position in the London theatre. It is often thought that they virtually ceased to exist, but that is not true. They continued to be a major touring company down to the end of the century, carrying the Queen's name deep into the realm, earning higher rewards than did the other companies (higher than the Chamberlain's men when *they* went on tour, for example). But in London, which is where the revolution happened, the Queen's men lost their hold. They were not even invited to play at court after 1595, and these were the *Queen's* men.

So they traveled far and wide throughout the kingdom, earning splendid incomes with their old-fashioned plays, carrying on with *The Famous Victories of Henry V* and *True Tragedy of Richard III,* and perhaps feeling a taste of chagrin when word reached them from London of what their former colleague, the young man from the country—gentle Will to some, an upstart crow to others—was doing with their plots to advance his career and revolutionize the theatre. ❧



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What advice do you give student writers today?

I tell them they not only need talent, they have to have a lot of courage and persistence. There are many forces in the world that are not on your side. It's difficult to find a good agent, and a good editor. Ideally, you should have another skill, another profession, something that will support you in hard times, and will make you familiar with another world so that you can write about it. It's also important to have real friends who are writers, who can exchange manuscripts with you, encourage you when things go wrong, and rejoice in your successes.

What was it like for you starting out? Did you always know you would be a writer?

I never knew that I would be a writer, but I wanted to be one from the age of seven or eight. When I was a child there were very few decent jobs open to women: you could be a nurse, a teacher, or a secretary, but not a doctor or a lawyer or a professor. When people asked me, what do you want to be when you grow up, I wasn't attracted to any of the obvious choices. But then I noticed that many of the children's books I read were by women, and realized that a woman could be a writer. And since I loved to make up stories, I thought I could do that.

Of course I had no idea how difficult it would be. I learned only later that when you finish a story it doesn't automatically get published, and that very few people are able to support themselves by writing stories. Though I was published here and there when I was in college, it took me ten years to have a novel accepted, and it was my third—the first two had died in a bottom drawer.

What is the relationship between the characters in your novels and the people you know in real life?

It is as distant as I can make it. My first novel, *Love and Friendship,* was set in a town based on Amherst, Massachusetts, where I had lived for three years. Some of the characters in that book were derived from actual people; I changed them, but not enough. Some of the originals were pleased to be in a novel, but others were angry and upset. From then on, at least three originals went into each of my characters, and many were pure invention. Readers still tell me, "Oh, that's Bob Smith," but they're always wrong, and often I don't even know the Bob Smith they're referring to.

alison lurie's vari

By the time I was 8 or 9 . . . it was my belief that . . . I would be an ugly old maid, the card in the pack that everyone tried to get rid of.

I knew all about Old Maids from the Victorian and Edwardian children's books that were my favorite reading. Old Maids wore spectacles and old-fashioned clothes and lived in cottages with gardens, where they entertained children and Old Maids to tea. They were always odd in some way: absent-minded or timid or rude or fussy. Sometimes they taught school, but most of their time was devoted to making wonderful walnut cake and blackberry jam and dandelion wine, to telling tales and painting watercolors, to embroidery and knitting and crocheting, and to growing prize cabbages and roses. Occasionally they shared their cottage with another Old Maid, but mostly they lived alone, often with a cat. Sometimes the cat was their familiar, and they were really witches. You could tell which ones were witches, according to one of my children's books, because there was always something wrong with them: They had six fingers on one hand, or their feet were on backward, and so on.

All right, that would be my future. I knew it was so because of the kind of positive reinforcement I was getting from adults. Just as with the Old Maids, all that I produced was praised: my school compositions, my drawings, my fudge brownies, my rag rugs and especially my stories. "Charming!" "Really beautiful." "Perfectly lovely, dear." Nobody ever told me that *I* was perfectly lovely, though, as they did other little girls. Very well, then: perfection of the work.

Not that it seemed to me like work. Making up stories, for instance, was what I did for fun. With a pencil and paper I could revise the world. I could move mountains; I could fly over Westchester at night in a winged clothes basket; I could call up a brown-and-white-spotted milk-giving dragon to eat the neighbor who had told me and my sister not to walk through her field and bother her cows. And a little later, when I tried nonfiction, I found that without actually lying I could describe events and persons in such a way that my readers would think of them as I chose: "Dear Parents—We have a new English teacher. He has a lovely wild curly-brown beard and he gets really excited about poetry and ideas." Or, if he had written an unfavorable comment on my latest paper: "He is a small man with yellow teeth and a lot of opinions." Or any of two, three, 20 other versions of him, all of them the truth—if I said so, the whole truth. That was what you could do with just a piece of paper and a pencil; writing was a kind of witch's spell.

—"No One Asked Me to Write a Novel," *New York Review of Books,* June 6, 1982

For me, and many of her friends, Bunny's death was a first serious experience of mortality. It wasn't just elderly relatives who died, newspaper casualties and the pawns of war. One of ourselves, even the queen, could be lifted off the board as succinctly as a jumped piece in chess.

It was hard for us to get used to the idea. For months afterwards we would find ourselves imagining that we saw Bunny at the end of a street, starting to dial her telephone number, setting aside some story to tell her, thinking how she would laugh when she heard that Gregory Corso had actually—and then remembering that she couldn't laugh, because her mouth was full of earth.

For years I used to dream about her: I would go on longer and longer journeys by bus and train and on foot to find her in some large strange house, oddly dressed. "I've been very ill," she would tell me, "but I'm getting better now." In my last dream, she was upstairs in bed in a boarding house by the sea on a cold winter day. The room had gray pink-sprigged wallpaper and a view of the empty ocean. Bunny spoke to me; she moved her lips, but no sounds came out, so I don't know what she was trying to say.

All of us tried to keep Bunny alive by referring current events to her opinion, quoting lines from her letters and poems, guessing and even arguing about what she would have said of this or that film, marriage, poem, or person, David Jackson and James Merrill attempted to get in touch with her spirit through their ouija board, producing long transcriptions in which Bunny's views and conversational style were oddly like their own. (In their defense it must be admitted that when she was in the mood Bunny could and did alter her views and style to suit her audience.)

Of course whenever someone dies, each of the survivors is left with a slightly different image. With Bunny, who had so many moods and roles, these images were perhaps more different than usual. It is quite likely that there are people who will recognize almost nothing in this portrait, or at least feel that my emphasis is all wrong. . . .

Bunny was a feminist before the movement was reinvented, in the dark ages of the early 1950s when it was much less popular to be a single female of independent mind and professional ambition than it is now; when any girl who didn't really want to stay home and keep house for a man and a lot of children was apt to be told by her friends and psychiatrists that she had not Accepted Herself as a Woman. Considering what she was able to accomplish in that hostile climate, it seems only logical that she would have been even more successful after the weather changed. My hope in publishing this book is to take advantage of the good weather, and give V. R. Lang, and her work, some of the attention that she loved and deserved.

—*V. R. Lang: Poems and Plays; with a Memoir by Alison Lurie* (1975)

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Whenever she [Polly Alter, the scholar-heroine of Lurie's eighth novel] looked through her papers, trying to get a perspective on the project, she became confused and depressed; she felt her subject splitting into multiple, discontinuous identities.

There was the shy little girl Lolly Zimmern; the flaky college freshman Laurie; the bohemian art student; the ambitious, calculating young professional that Kenneth Foster had taught; and the neurotic, unworldly artist that Jacky knew. There was the poetic lost child Laura whom Garrett Jones had married, and the obsessed genius who had died in Key West. According to her niece, Lorin was generous and sensitive; her stepmother remembered her as selfish and spiteful.

And what's more, it was clear by now that none of the people Polly had interviewed were lying, not wholly anyhow: everyone had told her the truth as he or she knew or imagined it. . . . Every one of those people expected her to reproduce their narrow vertical view of Lorin Jones. And what's more, if she didn't, they would be angry with her. Whatever she wrote, she would satisfy some of them and enrage others.

Suppose, just for the sake of argument, she were to write the biography of Lorin Jones that Jacky and Garrett expected, in which Lorin would appear as an eccentric, neurotic genius, and they as generous and wise and tolerant. They would be pleased, and reward her; they would see to it that her book was well and prominently reviewed—Jacky had already hinted as much. If she put her career first, this was the choice she would make. . . .

Against the screen of grainy, drifting snow, Polly saw herself in this alternative future, at a party in an East Side townhouse. She was elegantly dressed in black, and carefully made up; her hair was professionally styled and smoothly blown dry (in this incarnation she would be able to shop at Bendel's instead of Macy's, and go to the beauty salon once a week). The people at the party gazed at her with interest; not only because she seemed so cool and confident, but because she was a figure of growing importance and power in the New York world of museums and galleries and artists and dealers and critics. Other expensive-looking men and women stood around her, some of them recognizably famous. Maybe she was involved with one of them, though not seriously. If her career really took off, probably she wouldn't have the time or energy for a serious relationship: she would either be celibate or have brief affairs with men or women whom she didn't like or trust very much; who didn't much like or trust her.

Maybe that was why the face of the central figure in this scene showed no joy or ease: her expression was wary, calculating, and self-conscious. She looked like someone Polly wouldn't want to meet, let alone become.

The idea that she was about to choose, not only a version of Lorin Jones's past, but her own unattractive future, made Polly giddy.

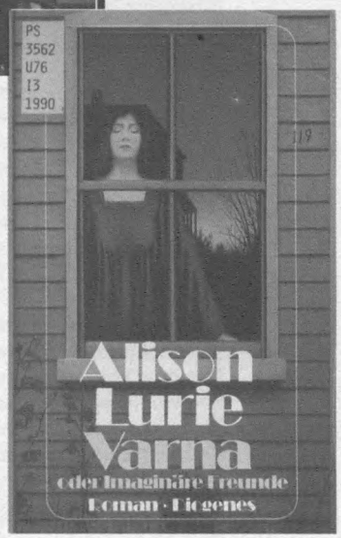
—*The Truth about Lorin Jones* (1988)

But at Cornell, guessing the real identities of Brian and Erica Tate (in *The War Between the Tates*) has been a favorite pastime for years. Was there really no such couple as the Tates?

Of course not. In the 1960s I had friends in several different colleges whose husbands left them—temporarily or permanently—for graduate students, and I wanted to write about this phenomenon. But the Tates were an amalgam; I made a great effort to be sure no one could identify them. To make the story more dramatic, my graduate student got pregnant, although this was something that rarely happened in real life.

What are some ways that the women's movement has been important to your work?

When I started writing, there was no women's movement, except in the past. In my first published novel, which appeared in 1962, few middle-class women with children had a job, let alone a career. This continued to be true until *The War Between the Tates* (1974), where my principal character has a kind of marginal job and her best friend teaches at the university part-time. But today the situation is reversed. In my new novel, which will appear this summer, my heroine doesn't have a job; she helps her husband with his work. Some of her acquaintances question this or even try to make her feel guilty about it; whereas back in the sixties, if you had both a job and children people would try to make you feel guilty about that.



What is the new book about?

The novel is called *The Last Resort,* and is set in Key West. It's about a retired professor and his wife who go there for the winter and become involved with some of the local characters and other tourists. Thematically, it's about retirement and enforced leisure and what it's like to live in a resort town; it's also about age and change and renewal and the knowledge of death.

Would you say these themes have appeared throughout your work?

That's a question for critics and interviewers to answer. I recently talked to someone from the BBC who thought that I was interested in the artistic life, in the relation between art and society. Others have said that I write about the relations between men and women, or what it means to be in the academic world, or the relationship of the public image to the private self, or time and what it does to people. I know that I tend to write about people my own age, and to be aware of the changes that men and women go through in their lives, the selves they leave behind. Even in my first novel, of course, where everyone was in their twenties, they had pasts, childhoods. But as you get older, the past becomes longer and heavier.

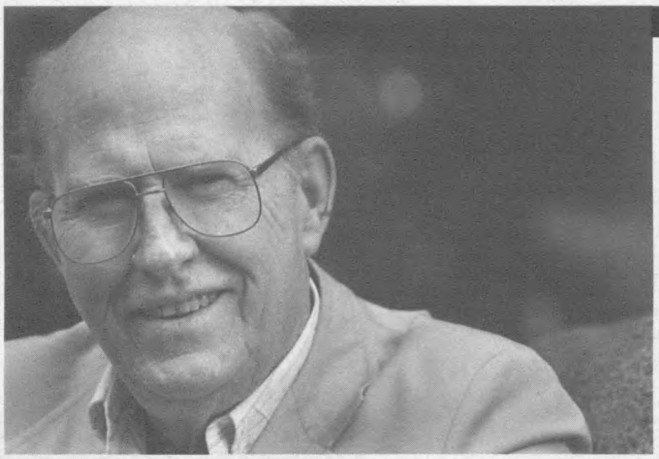
Clockwise from opposite page:

The War between the Tates *(French edition),*

The Truth about Lorin Jones *(Spanish),*

Imaginary Friends *(German),*

Foreign Affairs *(Hungarian).*



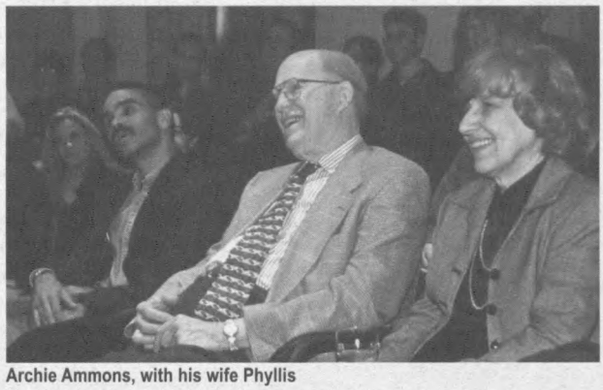
The Ammons Papers at Cornell

In the years since he arrived at Cornell in 1964, Archie Ammons has become a towering presence in American letters. He has won two National Book Awards, the Bollingen Prize, and a MacArthur Award; his most recent book of poems, *Glare* (Norton, 1998), is his twenty-third. But as with any great creative career, the beginnings are of especial interest, and the Ammons papers give a fascinating look at the development of his mind and art during his long years of obscurity.

On April 3, A. R. Ammons formally presented his papers to the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections at Cornell—sixty-eight bound notebooks, containing letters, scribblings, typewritten drafts, and miscellaneous papers, in addition to other materials. The presentation was the occasion of "Ammonsfest," a weekend of events in the poet's honor, including guest lectures by the critic Helen Vendler and by Roald Hoffmann, a Nobel prizewinner in chemistry as well as a poet in his own right. At the same time, the library mounted an exhibit on Ammons's life and works, which includes—among many items—his father-in-law's letter of permission to marry his daughter Phyllis and the roll of adding-machine tape that contains the original typescript of *Tape for the Turn of the Year* (1964).

Ammons published his first collection, *Ommateum* (1955), through a vanity press, at the cost of $480; it sold sixteen copies, for which he earned a grand total of $6.40. In this remarkable book (its title comes from the word for the single facet of the compound eyes of insects), Archie worked out his position as a visionary nature poet through a series of unpunctuated poems that imagine the dissolution and reconstitution of personal identity—a body, a voice, a consciousness—amidst an archaic, unpeopled landscape reminiscent of both the Mesopotamia of *Gilgamesh* and the shores of southern New Jersey. Not surprisingly, the young Ammons was an admirer of W. H. Auden's elegy to Yeats, which contains the following lines: "Now he is scattered among a hundred cities/And wholly given over to unfamiliar affections." ("I worship it regularly every other night," he wrote a friend.)

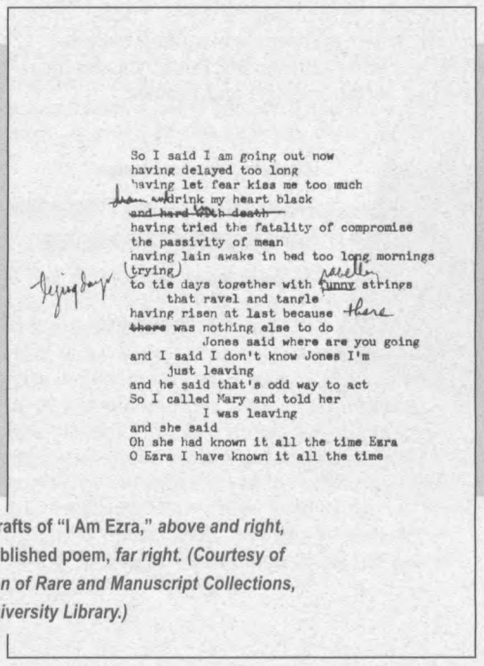
The most famous poem from *Ommateum* is "I Am Ezra," in which the speaker tries to command the elements by the ritual utterance of his name, only to end up half-dissolved among them—going out "into the night like a drift of sand" and "splash[ing] among the windy oats." The papers show that Ammons re-worked the *Ommateum* poems many times, but that "I Am Ezra" came quickly. Its earliest draft is close to final form (see below), though he tinkered somewhat with the final lines. "Clutch the tops of windy dunes" gets shortened to "clutch the dunes," and "beside forgotten seas" gets changed to "of unremembered seas"—a subtler alteration that suggests an even greater obliviousness ("unremembered" connotes "unknown" as well as "forgotten") while giving the line a conventionally lyric tone that soon disappears from Ammons's work.



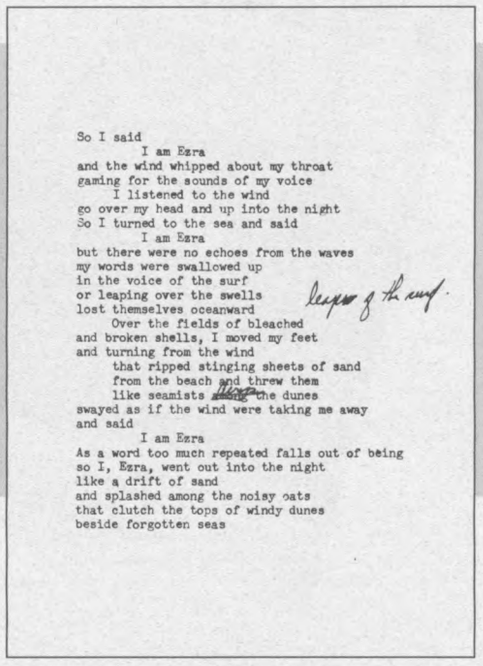
Archie Ammons, with his wife Phyllis and his friend and colleague Ken McClane, in the audience at Ammonsfest.

Who is this speaker who chants "I am Ezra"? The biblical name most obviously suggests a priestly or prophetic figure, and Ammons is often read as a poet in the prophetic tradition of Emerson and Whitman. (At about this time, he even composed a fragment to "Friend Walt.") But in other fragments from the same notebook, Ezra is an ordinary mortal who walks out on friends and lovers like the compulsive wanderer in a popular folk ballad (see below); in one version, he explicitly flees the intimacy of sexual contact. To move from these conventional rough drafts to the haunting impersonality of "I Am Ezra"—from a "So I" that is flatly colloquial to a "So I" that is both colloquial and biblical—is to witness Ammons's early, if long unrecognized, breakthrough to a distinctive poetic voice, a voice that is still vigorous and moving forty-five years later in *Glare*.

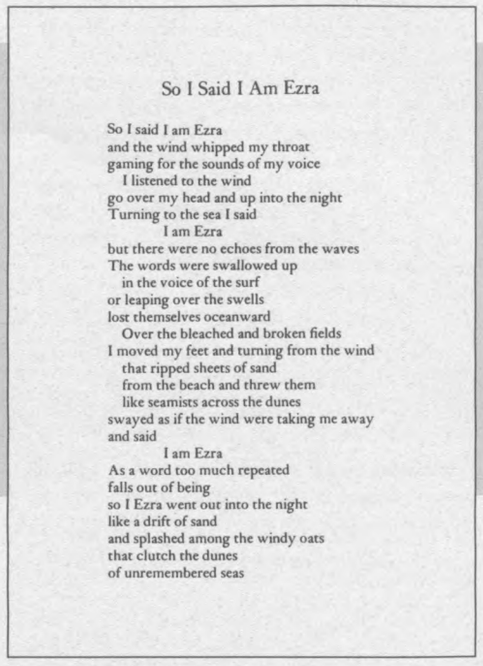
As for the question, Why Ezra? Archie has given his own typically disarming yet suggestive answer: it is the name of a high school classmate who died.



So I said I am going out now
having delayed too long
having let fear kiss me too much
drain drink my heart black
~~and hard with death~~
having tried the fatality of compromise
the passivity of mean
having lain awake in bed too long mornings
(trying)
to tie days together with funny strings
that ravel and tangle
having risen at last because there
~~there~~ was nothing else to do
Jones said where are you going
and I said I don't know Jones I'm
just leaving
and he said that's odd way to act
So I called Mary and told her
I was leaving
and she said
Oh she had known it all the time Ezra
O Ezra I have known it all the time



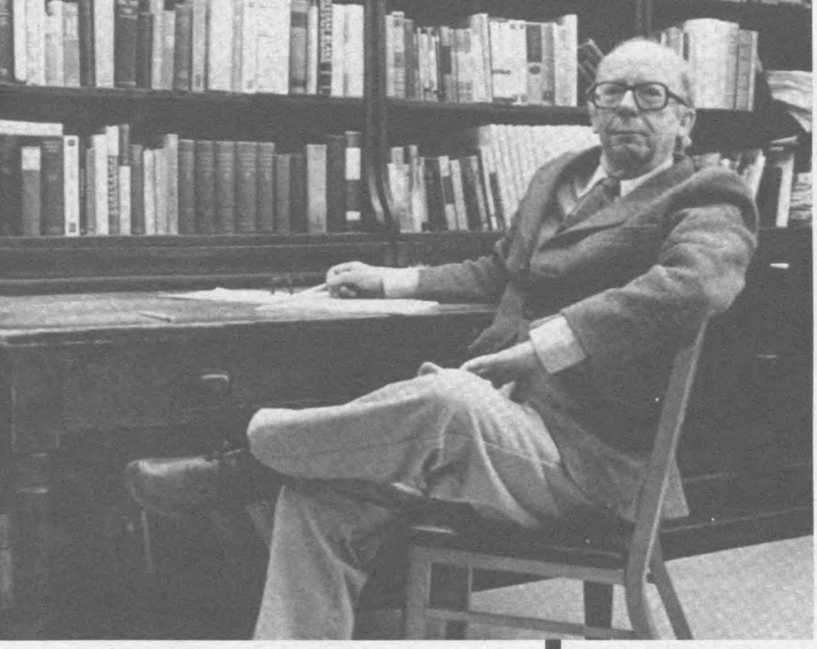
So I said
I am Ezra
and the wind whipped about my throat
gaming for the sounds of my voice
I listened to the wind
go over my head and up into the night
So I turned to the sea and said
I am Ezra
but there were no echoes from the waves
my words were swallowed up
in the voice of the surf
or leaping over the swells
lost themselves oceanward
Over the fields of bleached
and broken shells, I moved my feet
and turning from the wind
that ripped stinging sheets of sand
from the beach and threw them
like seamists ~~along~~ the dunes
swayed as if the wind were taking me away
and said
I am Ezra
As a word too much repeated falls out of being
so I, Ezra, went out into the night
like a drift of sand
and splashed among the noisy oats
that clutch the tops of windy dunes
beside forgotten seas



So I Said I Am Ezra

So I said I am Ezra
and the wind whipped my throat
gaming for the sounds of my voice
I listened to the wind
go over my head and up into the night
Turning to the sea I said
I am Ezra
but there were no echoes from the waves
The words were swallowed up
in the voice of the surf
or leaping over the swells
lost themselves oceanward
Over the bleached and broken fields
I moved my feet and turning from the wind
that ripped sheets of sand
from the beach and threw them
like seamists across the dunes
swayed as if the wind were taking me away
and said
I am Ezra
As a word too much repeated
falls out of being
so I Ezra went out into the night
like a drift of sand
and splashed among the windy oats
that clutch the dunes
of unremembered seas

Working drafts of "I Am Ezra," *above and right*, and the published poem, *far right*. *(Courtesy of the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Cornell University Library.)*



Scott Elledge

1914–1997

Scott Elledge, Goldwin Smith Professor of Literature Emeritus, died December 23, 1997. A distinguished scholar and editor of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century English literature, Professor Elledge was also author, most recently, of a biography of E. B. White. At the Memorial Service held in Sage Chapel, Jim McConkey, his longtime friend and colleague, delivered the following remarks.

I've never had much interest in genealogical histories—especially in family trees. You follow a given name back in time, through offspring and their offspring; the branching lines increase in number and complexity, seemingly into infinity. But of course that's not the case. Go back not many centuries and you get not a branching tree but a diamond, something like a baseball diamond. It all has to do with the fact that the human population decreases as we go back in time. For the sake of the baseball analogy, let's say that each of us is born at second base, and that the distance from second base to home represents the genealogical history of our race. Go back some generations and our predecessors fill all the space in the triangle formed by first, second, and third bases. But as we continue further back in time, our ancestors shrink in numbers as the population decreases, at a rate equal to its increase, until we get home. Home base is where Eve or Lucy dwells, mother of us all; and if she can be said to symbolize our natural origins, I guess we all get back home when we die. We are all interrelated, a single human race whatever our ethnicity, politics, or color.

As far as I know, Scott never displayed an excessive interest in baseball. Intuitively, though, he knew about the diamond shape, and what it signified about human mutuality, about our interconnectedness as human beings on this small planet. In all the decades that I knew him, I never heard Scott speak a word that was malicious or petty or self-serving. Often, at memorial services, the eulogist flatters both himself and the departed with half-truths. To avoid that, let me say that I've heard that Scott sometimes could be a bit finicky about how graduate students taught sections of a course under his direction or how the gardener trimmed the bushes in the garden behind his house. (Such concerns are understandable: his teaching and his home were central to his values and his life.) But a fuller truth about Scott's human relationships is that he cared about the condition of his fellows, including that of his graduate students and his gardener, and never was in competition with anybody else for status, honors, or privilege. He was a distinguished scholar and biographer, but he wrote from love of his subject, not from a desire for self-aggrandizement. For years, he looked after friends and colleagues who had become ill, or were simply unable to get out and about; he fetched them from their own homes or from nursing or retirement communities so that they could meet with other old friends for lunch at the Statler, or he would visit them there on a regular basis. It was an aspect of his nature that he never talked about. I remember telling Scott one day that I was going to see a former member of our department that afternoon at Ithacare. Scott smiled. "I'm glad to hear that," he said. "That means I won't need to go today." That was how I learned that Scott visited that colleague nearly every afternoon, bringing him news and good humor.

Scott loved word play, witticisms; his love affair with language helped make him the graceful stylist that he was. He had the rare ability to relieve the seriousness of departmental meetings with a play on words he had just made up, often to make the rest of us see that we were carrying our weighty pedagogical baggage a bit farther than necessary. Humor is always a good antidote to the professorial predisposition for over-analysis and abstraction—and a good antidote to the tedium that accompanies them.

People like Scott influence the rest of us. It was his own example that at least in part caused my wife and me to visit him in the hospital a few years back. Though still in intensive care, he seemed delighted to see us, and with the book that we had brought; he even made a joke or two. Afterwards, the person closest to him—the one who knows him best, and who of course was at his bedside—came out into the hallway with us. "Scott," she said, "is the kindest person I've ever known." I will remember those words of Liane as long as I remain alive, as the sort of tribute that also is a blessing, reaching out to all who hear it. I hope that those of us here today lucky enough to slide into home in advance of our loved ones can—and will be—blessed in a similar way by those who survive us.

Faculty Notes

Jacqueline Goldsby, assistant professor of English, joined the department last fall. After graduating from Berkeley, she did her doctoral work in the American Studies Program at Yale. Her dissertation, entitled *After Great Pain: The Cultural Logic of Lynching and Realist Representation, 1882–1922,* explores journalistic and fictional representations of lynching as a way of understanding how lynching evolved as a cultural practice and came to be tolerated by white society. In 1996 she published an essay in *Yale Studies in Criticism* on media representations of the Emmet Till case. At Cornell she has taught courses in the age of realism and naturalism and in nineteenth-century African American novelists.

A. R. Ammons's most recent book of poems—his twenty-third—is *Glare* (Norton, 1988).

Ellis Hanson has just published two books: *Decadence and Catholicism* (Harvard University Press) and *OutTakes* (Duke University Press), a collection of essays on gay themes in cinema.

Mary Jacobus's Clarendon Lectures, *Psychoanalysis and the Scene of Reading,* are forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

Timothy Murray coedited, with Alan Smith, *Repossessions: Psychoanalysis and Fantasms of Early-Modern Culture* (University of Minnesota Press). He has just been appointed acting director of the Society for the Humanities at Cornell.

Edgar Rosenberg has just completed the *Norton Critical Edition of Dickens's Great Expectations.*

Shirley Samuels is director of the Women's Studies Program at Cornell.

Mark Seltzer's *Serial Killers: Death and Life in America's Wound Culture* (Routledge) appeared this year.

Kate Shanley has just published *"Only an Indian": Reading James Welch* (University of Oklahoma Press) and *American Indian Autobiography: A Sourcebook* (Newberry Library).

Letter from the Chair

JONATHAN CULLER

Two major events in the life of the department this year have been the celebration in September of the fiftieth anniversary of *Epoch,* the national magazine of fiction and poetry published by our creative writing program, and the Ammonsfest, an April celebration of the career of A. R. Ammons (see page 6 of this newsletter).

The Epoch Festival happily coincided with the news that *Epoch* had won the first O. Henry award for the best literary magazine. It featured readings by the poets in the department—Ken McClane, Phyllis Janowitz, and A. R. Ammons—and by the four writers whose stories in *Epoch* had been selected for inclusion in the *O. Henry Prize Stories of 1997* (this group included the department's fourth poet, Robert Morgan, with a crossover hit, "The Balm of Gilead Tree"). For students and the general public, who turned out in large numbers, the centerpiece of the celebration was Don Delillo (who got his start in *Epoch* many years ago) reading from his new novel, *Underworld.*

The scholarly and critical books published by members of the department are listed on page 7; they cover a remarkable range—from Shakespeare to serial killers, from Catholicism and decadence to trauma and performance theory. I will just mention that Mary Jacobus, the Anderson Professor of English and Women's Studies, delivered the Clarendon Lectures at Oxford this fall. The series title: "Psychoanalysis and the Scene of Reading."

Once again, our faculty members and teaching assistants have done very well in the competition for College of Arts and Sciences teaching prizes: teaching assistants Dan Donaghy, Jennifer Hill, and Nina Revoyr won Clark Teaching Awards; Dan Schwarz won the Russell teaching prize, and senior lecturer Lydia Fakundiny, who had previously won the Clark, has now collected as well the Paul Award for Excellence in Advising.

Also noteworthy—a special cause of satis-faction to many of us—is the success of our graduate students this year in what continues to be a very difficult job market. At the time of writing we have noted fourteen tenure-track jobs—considerably better than in recent years.

This year we have experimented modestly with the introductory-level courses in the undergraduate curriculum. Two introductory courses focused on Shakespeare: just plain "Shakespeare" and "Shakespeare and the Twentieth Century," exploring the plays, modern adaptations of them, and the place of Shakespeare in contemporary culture. (Interestingly, the former course outdrew the latter.) We will repeat this experiment next year and will offer as well two new lecture courses that should appeal to nonmajors along with potential majors: "Literature and Ethics," taught by Satya Mohanty, and "Literature and Science," taught by a new assistant professor, Jennifer Ashton. The most popular course in the department, though (after creative writing), is "The Culture of Sixties," taught by the editor of this newsletter and Victorian specialist, Paul Sawyer. We conclude that it's this generation's keen desire to understand the past and come to terms with its cultural heritage that makes them flock to the sixties in such large numbers.

This year, faculty members in the English department have increased their efforts to broaden the conversation with our alumni. We have offered talks and presentations on occasions when alumni return to campus, spoken at Cornell Clubs around the country, and held special events in Boston (hosted by Torrey Harder '65) and New York (hosted by Richard Reinhold '73 and Beth Grossman). Our graduates, not surprisingly, are interested in discussing all kinds of topics, from the relations between novels and films to what English majors should read. Since we want to design courses that will prove useful and enriching to undergraduates in their lives after Cornell, it is particularly helpful for faculty members to talk regularly with the people our former students have become, who can help us to see what has worked for them and what may work in the future.

We are pleased with the results of expanding our community of inquiry beyond the campus, and we are particularly grateful to those alumni who are helping the department undertake activities that are not funded by the College of Arts and Sciences. (In these times when universities must increase financial aid and are being asked to check tuition increases, funding for anything new is very hard to come by.) Though the department is a multimillion-dollar operation, our discretionary income is woefully small, and we have many needs that are not met by current budgets. The travel and research allowance for faculty in the humanities has not increased for ten years and scarcely enables faculty to attend more than a single conference to keep abreast of current research, much less travel for their own research purposes. Our funds for undergraduate activities, such as a regular "coffeehouse" for English majors, are quite inadequate, and it immensely helpful to a department chair to have discretionary funds to foster projects that students and faculty come up with. I would like particularly to thank Fred Parkin '64 and Professor Alison Lurie for substantial gifts to endow a reading by a major fiction writer, Alan Schwartz '53 and Louise Schwartz of the Truman Capote Literary Foundation, which has funded the Truman Capote Fellowship in the M.F.A. Program, and Richard Reinhold '73 and Beth Grossman, who have contributed handsomely to a departmental contingency fund.

To recognize those who show an interest in helping the department, we are pleased to announce the formation of a friends group. Friends of the English department—alums or other interested parties who wish to contribute to the work of the department by helping us undertake activities that the college does not finance—will receive special invitations to events on campus, such as the Epoch Festival and the Ammonsfest mentioned above, and to occasional events elsewhere. Once we have a list of friends in place, I expect to communicate regularly about matters of mutual interest—from books that department faculty particularly recommend to discussions of ways in which our alumni might interact with our current English majors. I invite you to send contributions and inquiries to me c/o Friends of the English Department, Cornell University, 252 Goldwin Smith Hall, Ithaca, NY 14853-3201, or, for electronic inquiries, *english_chair@cornell.edu.*

I've been greatly impressed by the interest and enthusiasm of the Cornell alumni I have met this past year and look forward to meeting and hearing from others in the year to come.

ENGLISH
AT CORNELL

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