ENGLISH
AT CORNELL

A NEWSLETTER
FROM THE
DEPARTMENT
OF ENGLISH

FALL 2001 VOL. 5

In This Issue

This issue of *English at Cornell* is devoted to two of America's most honored men of letters. The first article is an interview with M. H. Abrams, conducted this summer at his home in Ithaca; the second concerns the memorial service for A. R. Ammons, who died last February at the age of 75.

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CORNELL

M.H. Abrams: *A Life in Letters*

by Paul Sawyer

M. H. Abrams's career as a teacher, scholar, and editor of literature now spans nearly seventy years, beginning with the publication of his undergraduate honors thesis at Harvard and continuing through the series of essays and lectures that have marked a vigorous, intellectually active retirement. His scholarly reputation rests mainly on two magisterial studies of romantic literature and criticism—*The Mirror and the Lamp* (Oxford, 1953) and *Natural Supernaturalism* (Norton, 1971)—and on a series of essays, many of them classics, on literary history and the philosophy of criticism. He is also senior editor of the two-volume *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, now in its eighth edition, which is the widest-selling anthology of its kind in America. All of Mike Abrams's work, even the smallest in scale—an anthology headnote, an informal lecture, a memorial tribute to an old friend—is marked by his breadth of grasp, his famous lucidity, and adroit tact. The above photo shows Mike and his wife Ruth at their retirement home in Ithaca, where the interview was conducted.

Paul Sawyer: You grew up in New Jersey.

M. H. Abrams: Yes, I grew up in Long Branch, a seashore town. It had its glory days. In the mid-nineteenth century and later it was a very fashionable resort town, visited in the summer by a number of presidents. I remember hearing Woodrow Wilson deliver a speech when I was a very young kid. It was also the town where the recent poet laureate, Robert Pinsky, was born and brought up. Edmund Wilson, the distinguished critic and man of letters, was born in Red Bank, five miles away; so was the novelist Norman Mailer. It's curious; when I lived there, there was no sense of its being a very literate place, but a lot of people with high literary talents came from Long Branch or its vicinity.

Did you always feel a call to literature?

It's hard to say. I used to devour books as a kid; it never occurred to me that I would write one. There was a time when I read three novels a day. I read fast; sometimes if I really enjoyed a novel I'd read it three times in one day, the same novel. It was during the Depression that I was in college and there was no living to be made in anything really, so I thought I'd start doing something I'd enjoy instead of something I didn't enjoy. I got a fellowship to study in England when I graduated from Harvard, and I spent a year in Cambridge working with I. A. Richards. He was in Moral Sciences (that's philosophy and ethics) rather than in English, which turned out to be fortunate because of the great men there in philosophy at that time: Wittgenstein, C. D. Broad, G. E. Moore, and others. I attended their lectures and the philosophical discussion club. When I returned to Harvard, English seemed to be the thing, but I maintained my philosophical interests.

Who among your teachers had a particular influence on your work?

When I was young and impressionable, J. Livingstone Lowes stood out—the man who wrote *The Road to Xanadu*, the famous study of Coleridge. He wrote flamboyantly, in a way that appealed to young people. The first book I published was my honors essay at Harvard, *The Milk of Paradise*, and it had something of the style of Livingstone Lowes; if you read the first and last paragraphs you'll recognize the orotundity I've tried to shed since.

That was your book on drugs.

Yes. It was about poets and other writers who had taken opium. It had a sudden revival during the drug culture in the sixties when three publishers wanted to re-publish it; I think the original publication was 350 copies. It sold out, and somebody sent me an ad years later,

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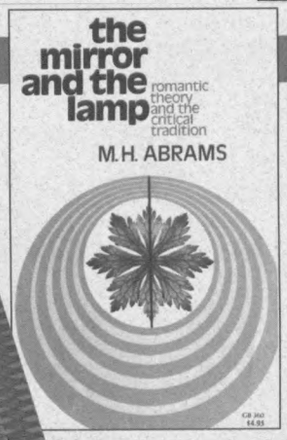

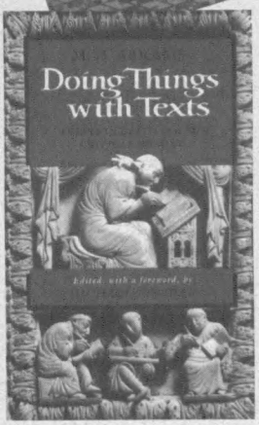

*M. H. Abrams's first book, now rare, was his undergraduate honors thesis (*The Milk of Paradise, *Cambridge, Mass., 1934).* The Mirror and the Lamp *(1953) developed from his dissertation.* Doing Things with Texts *(Norton, 1989) collects seventeen essays, including "Five Types of Lycidas," "Art-as-Such: The Sociology of Modern Aesthetics," and critical appraisals of the work of Bloom, Frye, Derrida, and other recent theorists.*

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from Seattle I think, for an original edition, and it sold for a hundred times the original price—I couldn't afford to buy it myself! But anyway, I granted the rights to republish the book, provided I could write a new preface in which I decried the drug culture by pointing out that these poets bloomed for awhile, but that opium effected a direct assault on the nervous system that they couldn't endure very long. I didn't want to be responsible for turning my students on!

You were in the tradition of Walter Pater, who retracted the conclusion to *The Renaissance*.

Writers in the drug culture were all "burning with a hard gem-like flame"—and burning out quickly.

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Photos: University Photography (Robert Barker, Frank DiMeo, Nicola Kountoupes)

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Office of Publications Services
9/2001 5M AP

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Your first published essays, I believe, were in science. Could you describe the scientific work that led up to them?

My first course at Harvard was in the summer session, when my friend Don McGranahan, a psychologist, and I taught The Psychology of Literature. When America went to war in 1941, S. S. Stevens, a distinguished psychologist, was asked by the Armed Forces to form a laboratory to solve the problem of vocal communications in noisy environments. Stevens asked me to join the lab. I said I didn't know anything about the subject. He told me, "Neither does anyone else. I'm looking for people who are bright, and you think like a scientist." So I joined the Psycho-Acoustic Laboratory, as it was named. We worked on all aspects of voice communications. At the time, the reports I wrote were graded secret, but after the war, one or two of them got to be published.

Your team developed the *Abel Baker Charlie* code.

That was one aspect of what we had to do. We tested communications equipment for the components which most accurately conveyed messages over background noise. We also devised experiments to develop verbal codes that were highly audible in noise. As part of that project we revised the verbal equivalents of letters of the alphabet, to eliminate words that are easily garbled or mistaken for each other. We also developed a list of highly audible code names for identifying military field stations—names selected for their audibility, without regard to their meanings. There were various oddities in this highly audible list which Bill Mauldin, the war cartoonist, picked up on right away. In a cartoon in *Stars and Stripes* a month or two after we disseminated this list, he drew GI Joe in a foxhole, water up to his neck, stubbly beard, stump of cigar in his mouth, saying into a telephone, "Hello, *Daffodil*? This is *Narcissus*." I met Bill Mauldin afterwards and I reminded him of that cartoon. He published with W. W. Norton, my publisher also, and I met him at the Norton offices.

Had you met your wife Ruth by this time?

I met her when I was on vacation from college in Long Branch. She lived in New York City and had a summer place in New Jersey; we met there when she was fourteen and a half. I didn't marry her then; we let a few years pass.

What brought you to Cornell?

I was offered a job by Cornell just after the war, and the only thing I knew about it came from a *Saturday Evening Post* article, a double-page spread showing the outside platform in Willard Straight which is still in use. It displayed tables with Cinzano umbrellas and undergraduates sitting there luxuriously sipping a tall drink, a view of Cayuga Lake in the distance. I said to myself, "Is this Eden, or an American university?" So I decided to go for an interview, and was charmed by the place.

Today it's a mark of academic prestige to move often and bargain for salaries, but you didn't go that route, you've been here ever since.

There were other possibilities, of course, but I withstood all the assaults.

What did you like about the place besides the beautiful views?

Well, I never met the distinguished American historian Carl Becker—he died soon after I arrived—but *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers* was one of the great books when I was a graduate student, I read it and greatly admired it, so I had that association. And I read his essay on freedom and responsibility at Cornell and his history of Cornell—its founders and founding—which were first given as Messenger Lectures. Those are marvelous writings. He speaks of the revelation when he came here from the Midwest that everybody left you to yourself, you had to be responsible for yourself; and I think that was the atmosphere here which made an old university like Harvard seem a little stuffy. It was free and easy at Cornell, and I liked it.

There were really extraordinary people here during my early years. You don't recognize this kind of thing until you look back, when it's too late. There was a time, for example, when, a few yards from my office in Goldwin Smith, there was Vladimir Nabokov, whom I don't need to expatiate on; David Daiches, one of the most brilliant, quick-witted, charming people in the world, a great after-dinner speaker; and Morris Bishop, not only a famous historian and French scholar but one of the great American wits, to my mind still the best light verse writer in America. And there were others. Robert M. Adams was located a little farther down the hall—another brilliant writer and critic. When you walked into the hall you could hear a typewriter clicking at one end and a typewriter clicking at the other—with the smell of my pipe smoke in the middle (I gave up my pipe about twenty years ago). At one end was Bob Adams, who never stopped typing; at the other end was David Daiches, who stopped typing only to talk once in a while. And they drove you crazy because you knew they were just churning out this fine prose.

You typed at a slower rate.

I didn't type, I wrote longhand. I like the feel of the flow of the prose under my pencil; I only wished it flowed a little faster.

Readers of *The Mirror and the Lamp* will be interested to know you didn't write fast enough. That, of course, was your second book, which made you internationally famous, it's not an exaggeration to say. How did that project evolve?

It started as a Ph.D. thesis at Harvard, following a seminar run by Professor Theodore Spencer—it was fashionable then to deal with literature in decades, and this was about the

decade of the 1830s. I got interested in romanticism and romantic theory. When I was working with I. A. Richards I also became interested in the use of metaphor—that was one of his hobbyhorses—and he had me read various people who wrote on metaphor. The thesis already had the title *The Mirror and the Lamp*, which is a quotation from Yeats, and it covered the waterfront—theories of literature, but also theories of criticism. It filled two very fat volumes, I'm ashamed now to say. Anyway, I threw away the second volume on theories of criticism and expanded *The Mirror and the Lamp* to deal with all sorts of other matters, but I was stuck with that title. Most people think I deal with only two metaphors, the mirror and the lamp; actually I deal with all kinds of metaphors having to do with literature and the creative mind, such as the growing plant. It's a dangerous thing, a title; even people who have actually read the book think it deals only with what the title specifies.

You started The English Literary Tradition, a two-semester course that is still the closest the English Department has to a required core course. Could you describe how that developed, and its relation to *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, of which you're the general editor?

When I came to teach at Cornell it was in the heyday of the New Criticism, which was anti-historical in its tendencies, and dealt with the isolated poem as such. I felt that a really important aspect of a student's introduction to literature is the treatment of literature in the order in which it was written, where you deal with the earlier poets before you deal with the later poets, who set themselves up against their predecessors or in important ways learned from them. When I first came to Cornell there was only one general survey course, in which you read five authors in chronological order, but you left out enormous chunks of literary history. David Daiches and I decided to inaugurate an inclusive survey course; he taught the first half and I the second. When he left I taught the whole course, with assistants that took over the third meeting of each week in small sections.

Then I remember a man came to my office—George Brockway, president of W. W. Norton. He'd gone to see Bob Elias, who'd been at Williams College with him, about editing a new kind of anthology, or an old kind of survey anthology in a new form. Bob told him I taught such a course. It turned out Brockway had appointed an earlier team of editors, but it had fallen apart. I remember he said, "If you take this on you can pick your own team, but there's one person of the original group—the only one smart enough to ask for an advance or royalties. We couldn't fire him because we can't afford it!" So I said, "Who is that person?" and he said, "David Daiches." I said, "My God, he's the man I developed this course with! Nothing could make me happier." So David was the one carry-over to the new team. Bob Adams also served on that team. They were a first-rate group of scholars and critics. I thought we'd spend a year to do the job, but four long years passed between the incipience and conclusion of the first edition, and boy, it was hard work—the selection of what to include, the footnoting, writing the historical and biographical headnotes. So we got it out, expecting it might sell perhaps ten thousand copies, and the first year it sold a hundred thousand copies—something fantastic like that—and it's never slackened, through its many succeeding editions.

What's new about the latest edition?

It's still basically the major English writers, with lesser writers that establish a literary and social context. There are now many more readings of an historical and cultural nature. We also have an inventory of supplementary materials online, that students are directed to. These include many hundreds of full-color illustrations that were not included in the volumes of the text, because we didn't want to displace literature proper. We also have an audio which is given out with the anthology—two disks that include poets, from Tennyson and Seamus Heaney, reading their own poems, poems written to be set to music, and poems written in Old and Middle English, or in a later dialect unfamiliar to the student.

How have students changed over the years since you first began teaching?

I've found students to be remarkably unchanging over the years, despite the changes in the cultural scene. There's a tendency to assume they're not as bright or as well prepared as they used to be, but I think that's a judgment which comes with aging. There was a peculiarly exciting time at universities just after the Second World War, when the GI Bill funded all kinds of mature students, many of them already married, and they were a wonderful group to teach. There were, however, some problems. I remember some students concocted a scheme to make extra money by selling examination questions. The students found a way to pilfer examinations from departmental offices; they duplicated the exams and sold them for five dollars apiece.

In my early years at Cornell, we were one of the very few major Eastern universities that was coeducational. If a girl wanted to come to a co-ed university in the East, Cornell was the obvious choice. And the result was we really got an inordinate percentage of the brightest girls in the country.

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In "Tintern Abbey," William Wordsworth (1770–1850) described his mature feelings of pleasure in nature: "Therefore am I still
A lover of the meadows and the woods
And mountains; and of all that we behold
From this green earth; of all the mighty world
Of eye, and ear, —both what they half create
and what perceive."

"This Green Earth: The Vision of Nature in the Romantic Poets"

If one knows anything about the romantic poets it is that they are nature poets, that they introduced into the literary realm an extraordinary emphasis on the natural world and an unprecedented set of attitudes toward that world. Wordsworth's poem "Tintern Abbey," which he wrote when he was 28 years old, can be accredited with establishing the basic attitudes we think of as distinctively romantic. The poem introduced, that is, what is sometimes called the romantic myth of nature, that is the representation of nature as in some sense a living thing in whose life human beings participate and whose life is referred to as "the one life." "The one life within us and abroad" is the Coleridge phrase. The poem also exemplifies what is sometimes called the "romantic religion of nature;" that is, "Tintern Abbey" seems to transfer to this green world certain features, together with the appropriate feelings of reverence, awe, and sacredness, that human beings and the Hebraic/ Christian culture had earlier reserved exclusively for God.

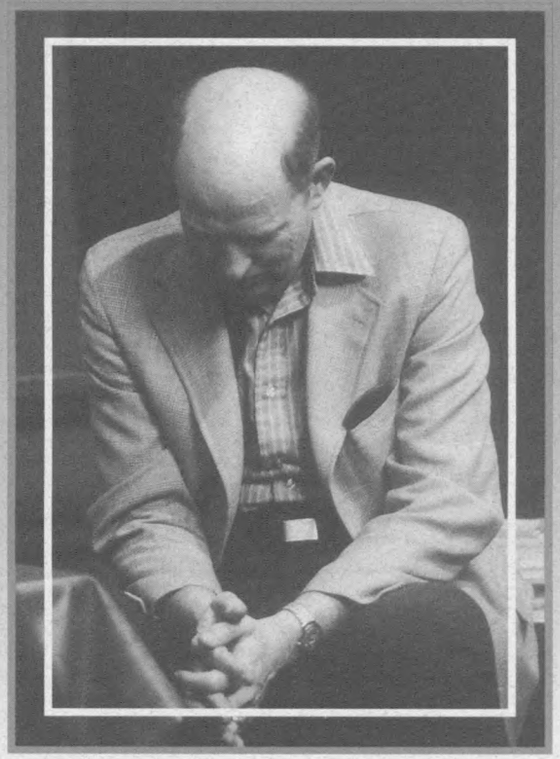
My aim today is to identify some of the ways in which the romantic poets were genuinely innovative in their treatment of "this green earth," and then to go on to claim that such treatment—the romantic myth of nature if you will—is not an outmoded phenomenon of mainly historical interest. My claim instead is that the kind of stance and attitudes toward nature expressed by the romantics is of central, indeed of crucial, import to us today, and relevant to some of our most pressing contemporary concerns. Such an import becomes clear if we simply substitute for the romantic term "nature" the modern term "environment," and if we substitute, for the romantic concept of "the one life"—the myth of the one life in which human beings are interrelated with nature—the current concept "ecology," a term that wasn't even invented until the 1860s and refers to the complex interrelations of human beings with other living things and all living beings with each other and with the physical environment.

We know today that nature, our biological and physical environment, is under severe stress. We are polluting, often poisoning, our soil, air, and water. We are rapidly depleting this green earth of its greenery, its forests and plains. We are exterminating at an increasing pace plant and animal species which, once lost, can never be reconstituted, and at a frightening rate we are overpopulating this crowded world. We, or anyway many of us, know these things from what the ecological scientists tell us as well as from obvious personal observation. But simply to know such things on the intellectual level is not enough. As the romantic poet Shelley pointed out in 1821 in his essay, "A Defence of Poetry," "There is no want of knowledge respecting what is wisest and best in morals, government and political economy." What we lack, Shelley tells us, is "the creative faculty to imagine what we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine; we want the poetry of life."

—M. H. Abrams

The Third Annual William H. and Jane Torrance Harder Lecture, September 8, 1999

February 18, 1926 **A. R. AMMONS** *February 25, 2001*



When a great writer dies, two things close at once—a canon, and a life. The work, till now an open-ended project, freezes into completeness, taking its place in the tradition of great works; but the life, incomplete as all lives are, breaks off, leaving the usual blank behind.

For awhile this spring, following the winter of his death, it seemed that Archie Ammons was as present as ever. Post-its of favorite poems clustered on the walls and the doors of offices in Goldwin Smith, and in a glass case, photos of the familiar face still beamed, though in news-color gray. Around town, the same face, more pensive but sketched in the same shade of gray, graced the cover of a special issue of Ithaca's local review, *Bookpress*. W. H. Auden famously wrote of the death of Yeats, "He became his admirers"; but Auden was distinguishing the mere personal life from the words that survive and are "modified in the guts of the living." For those who knew Archie, no such distinction was possible. Sooner or later we have had to come to grips with how hugely he mattered as a poet and a teacher and a friend—a hugeness both of what we have lost and of what he left behind.

"He has given many of us the words with which we will continue to think about nature, art, death, life, and a good deal else," says Don Randel, former Cornell Provost. Certainly Archie gave us words for mourning. His work is suffused with a profound sense of the insubstantiality of human existence amidst the impersonal processes of nature and time. In the early poems, bones scatter in the sand and bodies drift and dissolve in the wind. In his first published poem, the speaker declares, "I am Ezra"—at once the name of a Biblical prophet, a famous poet, and a classmate who was killed in a car wreck—as though Archie attained poetic speech by assuming the name and body of the non-living. In the great lyric "Easter Morning" (from *A Coast of Trees*), he describes his relationship to the twin brother who died in a "mishap" by the side of a road: "I stand on the stump/ of a child, whether myself/ or my little brother who died and/ yell as far as I can, I cannot leave this place, for/ for me it is the dearest and the worst,/ it is life nearest to life which is/ life lost." "Nature includes too much," he wrote grimly in another poem, "and art cannot include enough." Yet for Archie, nature that includes death is a totality so vast that within its circumference, death is no more a finality than life. "This is just a place," he wrote in the beautiful elegy for his friend Mae Noblitt. Like a musical motif, those five words dance through the poem's stanzas, gathering connotations, until they stand at the end charged with the force of a benediction.

And so it is natural for one to grieve for Archie through his own words, revisiting favorite poems, hearing again not only the words but the living voice. "The way he blends thorny abstraction, melodious descant, scientific precision, casual chatter, and even locker room talk into a completely recognizable voice is miraculous," says Roger Gilbert, a critic and longtime colleague. At the same time, "for a poet as prolific as Archie, he was amazingly gregarious, often sitting in his office with the door open just waiting for visitors to drop by for a chat. He hosted a weekly discussion in the Temple of Zeus for poets, and was incredibly welcoming to newcomers, no matter what level they were at. I've never known anyone as addicted to conversation. I suspect that his poetry was really a refinement and intensification of the unbuttoned everyday talk he loved so much. Many mornings as I'd pass through Zeus to get my coffee I'd decline Archie's invitations to sit and schmooze for a few minutes, explaining that I had to go prepare my class (which I did). I'd give anything to go back and have those missed conversations now."

This intimacy of speech, common to both the man and the work, accounts for the most moving moment in Archie's memorial service, held last April 29 in Sage Chapel. After a brief reminiscence by Jim McConkey, a speaker said, "Thanks, Jim—isn't he a charmer? . . . Am I coming through all right?" The voice was Archie's, recorded on a tape prepared by the English departmental administrator, Marianne Marsh. Archie then read "In Memoriam Mae Noblitt," followed by the second surprise—his fluid, graceful rendition of the hymn, "Shall We Gather by the River."

It is a safe bet that the voice of A. R. Ammons will be "coming through" for as long as the English language is read.

—Paul Sawyer

The Ammons memorial issue of Bookpress, *with a lead article by Roger Gilbert, is available online at* bookpress@thebookery.com.

however much we learn, tho, we may
grow daunted by our dismissibility

in so sizable a place: do our gods
penetrate those reaches, or do all

those other places have their godly
nativities: or if the greatest god

is the stillness all the motions add
up to, then we must ineluctably be

included: perhaps a dribble of
what-is is what what-is is: it is

nice to be included, especially from
so minor a pew: please turn, in yr

hymnals, to page "Archie carrying on
again": he will have it his way

though he has no clue what his way
is: after such participations as

that with the shrill owl in the
spruce at four in the morning with

the snow ended and the moon come
out, how am I sagely to depart from

all being (universe and all—by
that I mean material and immaterial

stuff) without calling out—just a
minute, am I not to know at last

what lies over the hill: over the
ridge there, over the laps of the

ocean, and out beyond the plasmas
of the sun's winds, and way out

where the bang still bubbles in the
longest risings: no, no: I must

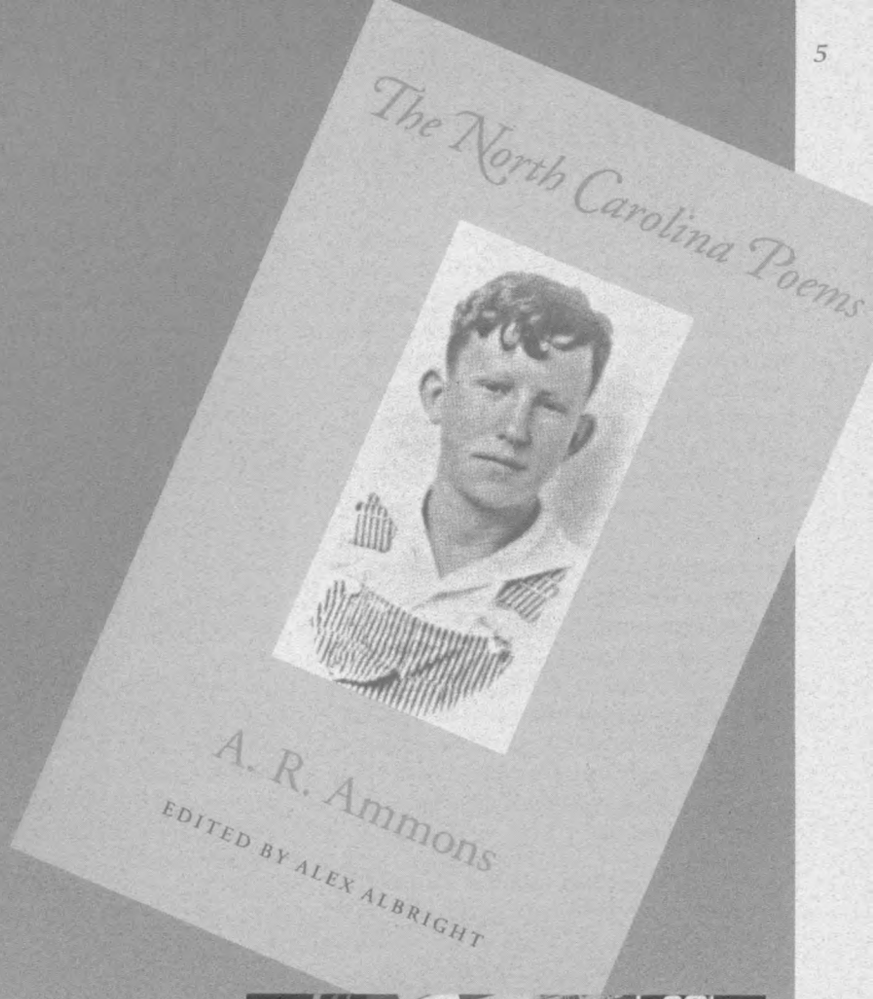
get peanut butter and soda crackers
and the right shoe soles (for ice)

and leave something for my son and
leave these lines, poor things, to

you, if you will have them, can they
do you any good, my trade for my

harm in the world: come, let's
celebrate: it will all be over

—A. R. Ammons
Excerpt from *Glare* (1997)



Litter on a door celebrates Archie's National Book Award for Garbage *(1973).*

The Future of Minority Studies

by Kenneth McClane

This November Cornell will be the site of a conference entitled "The Future of Minority Studies: Redefining Identity Politics," involving a distinguished group of literary scholars, historians, psychologists, and philosophers from Cornell and elsewhere. The event is hosted by the English Department and the Minority and Third World Studies faculty, a group of department members who teach courses in African and African-American, South Asian, Asian-American, Native American, Latino, Pacific, and Caribbean literatures. The conference will pose such urgent theoretical questions as, "What is the epistemic and the political significance of identity?" and, "Is a focus on identity-based struggles incompatible with our belief in moral universalism?" We expect the questions to encourage stimulating discussion ranging from ethics and epistemology to political theory and literary analysis.

The Cornell conference comes at a time of crisis in the history of Minority Studies. Recently, there have been many attacks on the legitimacy of identity as an analytical concept. Some scholars complain about the difficulty of scrutinizing what they think must be "ineffable essences"; others chastise "identity politics"—sometimes with good reason—for being unnecessarily separatist. Still, many of us know that our identities as, say, Black persons or as lesbians, shape our work powerfully, just as they influence our lives. If the last few years have taught us anything, it is that the notion of identity remains as ill-understood by the academy as it is undeniably axiomatic to many of us. Far too often, minority students are told that their identification with a specific community—that they, for example, grew up in Harlem or are gay—is immaterial. And yet their education at their grandmother's knee, the truths they've gleaned from experience, those things they have suffered and triumphed over, are inheritances that need to be respected and interrogated. This knowledge permits these students to understand much about power, authority, and the value of connection; it, in truth, gives them the gift of themselves. They know as much (however remotely), and yet they have no ready language for celebration. But why don't they? How can we argue productively for the value of identity as a provident source for knowledge, and how can we make certain that the important work that minority scholars undertake reaches those who most need to learn from it? These are the important theoretical and practical questions—crucial ones for all of us who wish to live responsibly in a multi-ethnic world—that the conference seeks to address.

The event at Cornell is part of a year-long bicoastal research project conceived by two of our former English graduate students, Paula Moya (now a professor at Stanford) and Michael Hames-Garcia (now a professor at SUNY Binghamton), together with Linda Alcoff (Professor of Philosophy at Syracuse University) and Satya Mohanty (Cornell). It is undergirded by a fine new anthology of scholarly essays, *Reclaiming Identity: Realist Theory and the Predicament of Postmodernism* (University of California Press, 2000), edited by Moya and Hames-Garcia. The project also includes a major conference at Stanford as well as related symposia at Binghamton. ■

Abrams, continued from page 3

Speaking of students, you once told me a story about a gifted student you had, named Thomas Pynchon.

I was teaching a course in 18th-century literature and got a paper on Voltaire's *Candide* and Johnson's *Rasselas* which was brilliant—clearly beyond the capacity of an undergraduate. I couldn't think of where it could have been plagiarized from, so I did the canny thing; I wrote on it, "This is a very interesting paper, please come in and talk about it." A pencil-thin young man with a pencil-thin moustache came shyly into my office and sat down, and in about two minutes it was clear he had written the essay. This was Thomas Pynchon. I only then recognized him as the author of materials that were later included in his first book *V*, and which had been printed in the student publication of the time. I said to him, "Which honors seminar are you taking?" and he said, "I'm not taking an honors seminar." "Why?" "Because I'm not good enough," he said. I think the remark was perfectly genuine; he had no high opinion of himself. That was my first, almost my last meeting with Tom Pynchon.

You did the bulk of your work before the advent of those critical methodologies from continental Europe that came to be nicknamed "theory." What thoughts do you have now about the Age of Theory?

"Theory" of various kinds has been expounded by people who are extremely bright and inventive, but I think they are four-fifths on the wrong track; the remaining fifth, on the other hand, will leave a permanent mark on our thinking about literature and intellection in general. What I most oppose, in some types of theory, is that they eventuate in a radical skepticism about concepts and criteria that we live by. "Everything is a social construct." Well, every concept is indeed a social construct, but that doesn't mean it isn't valid. The tendency is to assume that anything that is a human construct lacks a sound foundation, which leaves you with only one alternative: either something is an absolute—a totally unconditional foundation—or else it is vulnerable to skeptical deconstruction. I myself don't believe in absolutes, but then you don't need absolutes; adequate assurance is enough for us to rely on and live by. I was much struck by a passage by the American philosopher William James, about the philosophical search for an absolute: "The cold perfection of the absolute moves me as little as I move it." But I've written about these topics in a number of essays that doubtless are gathering dust on library shelves.

After you retired, you certainly didn't stop thinking and writing. Could you say a word about your latest project?

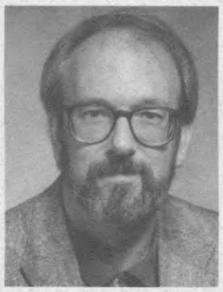
I have a hobbyhorse that I've been riding for the last several years; I call it "the fourth dimension of a poem." Critics usually attend to three dimensions: the visual dimension (the cues offered by the look of a poem on the printed page); the auditory dimension (how it sounds to the ear); and the dimension of the meaning of the words that constitute the poem. There is also a fourth, the articulative dimension (the physical activity of enunciating the language of the poem, either aloud or silently to ourselves). This dimension is largely overlooked, but it plays an important part in the experience and impact of a poem. In conversation, we've become so habituated to enunciating words and phrases that our perception of this dimension has been dulled or obliterated, but major poets know, whether or not deliberately, how to exploit this factor in their poetry. In good poems, what we perceive as the just-right word or phrase is in part determined by the physical enunciation and gesture—the position, tension, and change of position of the tongue, the touch of the tongue in various parts of our mouth, the shape and size of the oral opening, the resonance of the utterance in the throat or nose, and so on. I hope to write about these and other important aspects of the fourth poetic dimension in the near future.

One last question: What is the secret of your continuing good health?

Not worrying about it! ■

New Faculty

James Eli Adams returned to the department last fall as a professor of English. He earned his undergraduate degrees from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Oxford University (where he was a Rhodes Scholar) and received his Ph.D. at Cornell in 1987. He then taught at the University of Rochester and Indiana University, where for seven years he co-edited *Victorian Studies*, the main journal for scholars of Victorian history and culture. He has published and reviewed widely on Victorian topics, though he is best known for his work on Victorian masculinity. His book *Dandies and Desert Saints: Styles of Victorian Masculinity* (Cornell, 1995) was named a *Choice* Outstanding Academic Book for the year. He is also editor (with Andrew Miller) of *Sexualities in Victorian Britain* (Indiana, 1996). He is currently writing *A History of Victorian Literature*, commissioned by Blackwell for a new ten-volume History of British Literature. His teaching interests range widely, as his lineup for the 2001-2002 academic year may suggest: a first-year writing seminar on mystery stories, a 200-level course in children's literature, a 300-level course on the nineteenth-century British novel, and a graduate seminar on Victorian poetry.



Laura Donaldson, a Cherokee from Oklahoma and California, joined the department last fall as a professor of English after six years at the University of Iowa. She graduated from Guilford College and received her Ph.D. in Historical Theology from Vanderbilt. She works at the intersection of American Indian studies, postcolonialism, women's studies, and religious studies. She is the author of *Decolonizing Feminisms: Race, Gender, and Empire-Building* (1992) and the editor (with Kwok Pui Lan) of *Postcolonialism, Feminism, Religious Discourse*, which is forthcoming this fall from Routledge. A third book, *The Skin of God: American Indian Writing as Colonial Technology and Post-Colonial Appropriation*, is under contract to the University of North Carolina Press. In her first year at Cornell she taught a graduate course in American Indian women's writing and an undergraduate seminar, Gender, Race, and the Law; she has also been appointed a fellow of Akwe:kon, the Native American program house at Cornell. She and her husband are the owners of Badger Creek FlyTying, a fly-fishing and fly-tying company that can be accessed online at *eflytyer.com.*

Retired

Barry Adams retired this spring after thirty-eight years at Cornell. He graduated from Boston College and took his graduate degrees at the University of North Carolina before coming to Cornell as an instructor in English, specializing in Renaissance drama. His work includes a critical edition of John Bale's *King Johan* (1969) and the book *Coming-to-Know: Recognition and the Complex Plot in Shakespeare* (1999), which looks particularly at the function of anagnorisis in the comedies. Early on, he showed himself to be a talented administrator; he was made chair of the department at the age of 35, and later served as Vice Provost for Undergraduate Education (1984-87) and Director of the Religious Studies Program (1991-1995), which he helped to found. His recent stint as Director of Undergraduate Studies, during which he made valuable contributions to a re-thinking of the undergraduate curriculum, was typical of his devotion to Cornell, to the department, and to the life of students. He is a Renaissance man not only in the range of his interests but also in his distinctive *courtoisie*—the sign of an instinctive generosity and decency that will be greatly missed.

Faculty Notes

Jonathan Culler has been voted a fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Roger Gilbert has co-edited (with Jeffrey Robinson and Anne Wallace) *The Walker's Literary Companion*, a selection from the works of famous literary walkers, and *The Quotable Walker*, both from Breakaway Books. (A reading from the first of these books was also the occasion of A. R. Ammons's last public appearance.)

Alison Lurie's latest book is *Familiar Spirits* (Viking, 2001), a memoir of the poet James Merrill and his companion David Jackson, which details how the two men's personalities informed *The Changing Light at Sandover*, Merrill's long poem on the spirit world.

Scott McMillin has edited *The First Quarto of Othello* for Cambridge University Press.

Satya Mohanty's *Literary Theory and the Claims of History: Postmodernism, Objectivity, Multicultural Politics* (Cornell University Press, 1997) outlines a realist theory of social identity and multicultural politics, showing why radical moral universalism and cultural diversity need to be seen as complementary, rather than competing, ideals.

Robert Morgan's new volume of poems, *Topsoil Road* (Louisiana State University Press, 2000) includes poems that range across the history of the Carolinas from the days of the Cherokee to the lifetime of the poet's father. His best-selling novel *Gap Creek* won the Southern Book Critics Circle Award and The Appalachian Writers Association Book of the Year. Morgan's third novel, *This Rock* (forthcoming in September from Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill), continues the lives of the widow and her two sons from *The Truest Pleasure*. Hank, the young husband in *Gap Creek*, is a carpenter in the new novel.

Tim Murray, Director of Graduate Studies in Film and Video at Cornell, has just become a coeditor of *Ctheory Multimedia*, a new media site for electronic art projects and new media theory published and hosted by the Cornell University Library's Electronic Publishing Program. *Ctheory Multimedia* publishes semi-annual collections of electronic art and theory organized around conceptual themes.

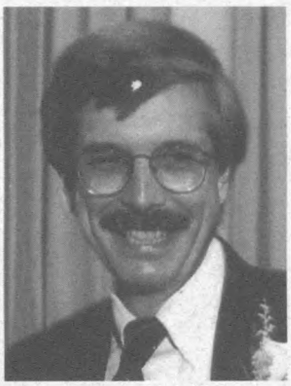
Steve Parrish has edited the third edition of the Norton Critical Edition of Jane Austen's *Emma*.

Letter from the Chair

When I was a college student, a standing joke among my peers was that, if you required an explanation for any aspect of the history of England (say, in an exam), you could always reach for the phrase, "the rise of the middle classes." Likewise, academic departments are always reliably described as being in "a state of transition." The transition currently most vivid to me as Chair involves our personnel. We are seeing an increasing number of new faces in faculty meetings these days. Partly this is a matter of demography. We have had few retirements in the last twenty years; we can expect quite a few in the period that lies ahead. Then, too, for whatever reason, mobility in our profession seems on the upswing (from what, at Cornell at least, has been an exceptionally stable baseline). Sometimes this mobility favors us. We are pleased to welcome Shirley Samuels back into our ranks, after a one-year stint in a named chair of American Literature at Delaware. In the coming year, our American wing will be further strengthened by the arrival of Kate McCullough, who works in nineteenth-century American Literature, and Nicole Waligora-Davis, who specializes in African-American Literature. Into the Americanist debit column must go (at least for the present) Mark Seltzer, who is off to test the waters of an endowed professorship at UCLA. Mary Jacobus, who left us two years ago on a similar mission, has decided to remain at Cambridge, where she is one of the four named professors of English. But (to move to the opposite column), we expect with great enthusiasm the arrival of a major American poet, Alice Fulton, who will join us in the Spring. She comes to us from Michigan, where her teaching has been enviable. Her poetry is superb. We're lucky to have her.

One transition has come to an end. This year we weathered the migration of half the department from Rockefeller to Goldwin Smith Hall. It's good to be in one building. In a few weeks, hammering and dust will again be our lot, but in much smaller doses, as our existing departmental lounge expands to become a fine new room, suitable for lectures, readings, and receptions.

The importance of such events to our department is considerable. They are a mainstay of our creative writing program, providing inspiration to students and faculty members alike. Since it was endowed by the Rosenzweig family twenty years ago, the Robert Chasen Poetry Reading Series has featured major poets, including such luminaries as John Ashbery, Richard Wilbur, and Li-Young Lee. The Chasen series now alternates with the McConkey Reading, which bring writers of prose fiction to campus in honor of Jim McConkey, Professor



Emeritus of English, through the support of Fred Parkin, '63, a former student of Jim's. Tim O'Brien gave the first McConkey lecture two years ago. He made his presence felt beyond the lecture hall, as he offered a colloquium on writing open to undergraduate and graduate students, lunched with our MFAs, was a lively presence at the reception that followed, and finished off the day with further conviviality with the MFAs. This fall we look forward to a McConkey reading by Tobias Wolff, author of *This Boy's Life*, *In Pharaoh's Army*, and several collections of short stories, the most recent of which is *The Night in Question*.

On the literary-critical side of things, the Paul Gottschalk Memorial Lecture has been given annually for the past twenty-two years, by such distinguished lecturers as Ian Watt, Stanley Cavell, Marjorie Garber, and our own M. H. Abrams. This year's Gottschalk lecture was delivered by Stephen Greenblatt, the premier scholar and critic of Renaissance literature in the world. The Gottschalk lectures have recently been joined by the Harder Lecture Series, endowed by Torrance Harder '65, in honor of his father and mother, both Cornellians. The Harder lectures are a joint venture with the Cornell Plantations. They explore the relationship between English literature and nature and are given by a member of our department. Thus far, Harder Lectures have been delivered by Joel Porte, Robert Morgan, M. H. Abrams, and Jim McConkey. This year's lecturer will be Alison Lurie.

The audience for these major readings and lectures far exceeds the capacity of the room being crafted for us in Goldwin Smith Hall. Smaller events, however, have their own part to play in the life of the department, and for these our new room will be perfect. Our creative writing program sponsors readings, some of them by our MFA students, on what approaches a weekly basis. Lectures by literary critics on everything from the fiction of Robert Louis Stevenson to the poetry of medieval Ireland also occur with some frequency. Faculty members and staff have had to endure considerable wear and tear in seeking venues for these events. It will be good to put their energy to more productive purposes. Wherever they are held and whatever their size, lectures by visitors and the receptions that follow cost something. Donations from the Friends of English keep these events alive. We hope to see you at some of them, and we appreciate your support. Dates and times should, technology willing, be available on our Web page (www.arts.cornell.edu/english/index.html).

A. R. Ammons died early this spring. For nearly forty years, he was a presence in the department and the halls of Goldwin Smith. It was a remarkable feeling to be in the neighborhood of one of the century's great poets, not that he ever reminded you of this by word or demeanor. On April 29, we held a memorial service in Sage Chapel. We listened to Archie's poems, read by people close to him (including our incoming poet, Alice Fulton), interspersed with a few reminiscences. It was an afternoon none of us will forget.

—Harry E. Shaw

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