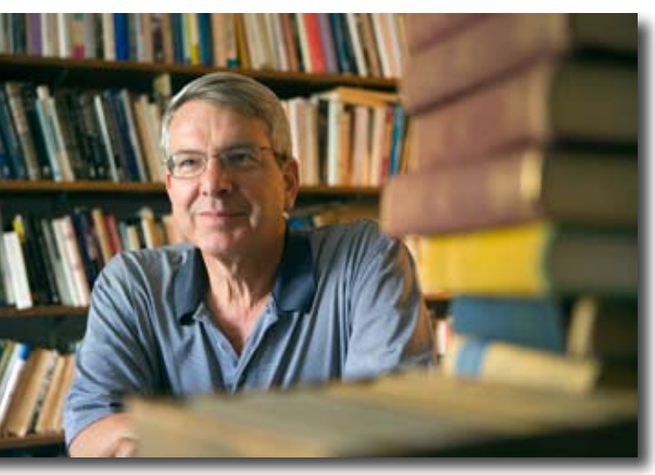
English
AT CORNELL
A NEWSLETTER FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
FALL 2007 VOL. 10

On Taking Thought as Far as It Can Go

A Conversation with Jonathan Culler

Jonathan Culler, the widely recognized writer and teacher and two-time chair of the English Department, needs no introduction to readers of English at Cornell. *Since he came to Ithaca in 1977, he has arguably had a greater influence on humanistic studies at Cornell than any other person. The publication of his early book* Structuralist Poetics *(1975), which won the Lowell Prize of the Modern Language Association, earned him a reputation as a preeminent American exponent of structuralism, a then new set of approaches to culture, linguistics, and literary meaning. Though best known for his work on theory, he also has written with distinction as a literary critic, beginning with his first book,* Flaubert and the Uses of Uncertainty *(1974). His other books include* On Deconstruction *(1982);* Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction *(2000), which has just been translated into Kurdish; two essay collections; and most recently,* The Literary in Theory *(2007). When M.H. Abrams, Cornell's preeminent literary historian and scholar, retired in 1982, the Class of 1916 Chair appropriately passed to Jonathan. His appointment to head Cornell's Society for the Humanities might have surprised those who understood deconstruction to be a subversive, if not gleefully nihilistic, mode of skeptical critique. Instead, by opening up the Society to a challenging variety of topics and perspectives, Jonathan permanently expanded the conversation around the humanities at Cornell. Among his many honors is his election to the American Philosophical Association in 2006.*



In this interview with Paul Sawyer, Jonathan describes some friends and moments from his earlier career and then offers some reflections on the enduring value of theory, not as a set of abstruse doctrines but as an unbounded, ever-changing series of questions and vantage-points.

P. Could you start by describing how you first became interested in the body of work we now call "theory"?

J. During my freshman year at Harvard, my tutor assigned me to read conflicting interpretations of Marvell's "Horatian Ode" by Cleanth Brooks and Douglas Bush in order to analyze their competing theoretical assumptions. I found this a very engaging assignment: reflecting on different ways of doing criticism seemed a real advance over following some model. Initially, then, I was more interested in critical methods than in theory, but in my senior year Joseph Frank, a visiting professor from Princeton, gave a seminar on trends in contemporary criticism, which covered early twentieth-century theoretical writing up through phenomenology—I found this extremely interesting. From Harvard I went to Oxford on a Rhodes Scholarship to do a BPhil in comparative literature, for which I wrote a short thesis about phenomenology and literary criticism, and I spent time reading in European philosophy.

I finished that degree in 1968, when the structuralist movement was well under way, and since structuralism often involved a critique of phenomenology, I was eager to explore that development. I decided to stay on in England to pursue the equivalent of a PhD, a DPhil. Structuralist linguistics had become a pilot discipline and was seen as holding great possibilities for other areas in what the French call the human sciences, and I chose to work on structuralism and the use of linguistic models in literary criticism for my doctoral thesis. This eventually became *Structuralist Poetics.* Then, since deconstruction first seemed to arise as a critique of phenomenology and in some cases of structuralism, I proceeded to read and write on Derrida and post-structuralism.

P. I would imagine England to be the last place to learn French theory.

J. Certainly studying theory in England was not something that made a lot of sense. The most common form of resistance to theory then was: "We English are sensible people who don't go in for that fancy French nonsense"—the same as the attitude toward French cooking in those days.

In my first year I worked with Christopher Ricks, who was very smart and lively but deeply opposed to what I was doing and quite feisty about it. A paper I wrote for him in my first term began with an epigraph from Sartre. Ricks circled that epigraph in red pencil and wrote, "Do you really believe this absurd remark?" And went on in like manner—he didn't want to let me get away with anything. In my college in Oxford there was a ceremony every term called Collections, in which you appeared in the dining hall in your gown before the master and the senior tutor, who read out the report from your supervisor. Ricks's report was that I was really much better than my work—quite intelligent actually, despite the dubious essays I had written.

I decided to stay on in Oxford to do a PhD in part because an expert on stylistics, Stephen Ullmann, had just been appointed to the chair of romance languages. I wrote him asking whether he would supervise a dissertation on structuralism and linguistic models, and he agreed.

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I think my topic would not have been accepted by the graduate faculty at Oxford had I not been the first student of the new professor. He was a benign and liberal supervisor, not disputing what I wrote but usually suggesting that I add footnotes referring to other views on the matters I was discussing.

As I say, Oxford was not then a place where there were professors who were very knowledgeable about literary theory or continental philosophy, but in the end I think this had good effects for me: since in this prestigious place, Oxford, I knew more about my subject than anybody around, that gave me a certain confidence in reviewing books and writing about these topics. If I'd been working elsewhere with someone who knew vastly more than I did, I might have been much more inhibited, and it would have been much harder to write.

P. So you developed without a strong mentor. How did you meet the people you were writing about?

J. One virtue of studying in England was proximity to France—I could go frequently. When I was studying structuralism, I attended seminars with people like Barthes, Genette, Greimas, Todorov, and others involved in this movement. I also met Barthes on several occasions in England for longer periods—giving him little tours of Oxford and Cambridge on his visits there. Though talking with Barthes was certainly interesting, I must confess that attempts at intellectual interchange were a disappointment. I'd usually be bursting with questions: "Don't you think this? Shouldn't we rather say that?" and he'd sort of brush me off, saying, "Sans doute vous avez raison" ("I'm sure you're right"). He was really a writer rather than an argumentative critic.

Derrida's work I came to know in the summer of 1968, when I read *Of Grammatology*, which had been published the previous year. He was writing directly on the relations of linguistics and literary study, and his critique of Saussure's work in structuralist linguistics certainly sharpened my thinking. In the final chapter of *Structuralist Poetics* I discuss briefly the work of Derrida and some others, and though I didn't then understand it very well, still, I avoided making egregious errors.

I was teaching a seminar with Alan Montefiore at Oxford on contemporary continental philosophy when Montefiore invited Derrida to come to Oxford. That's when I first met him. And then back in Paris I attended his seminars and got to know him better. In contrast to Barthes, Derrida took delight in intellectual conversation; he was a man of immense intellectual generosity. He was always willing to talk about whatever issues came up. And he was very good at answering questions about his work.

I went to Yale as a visiting professor in the fall of 1975, which was Derrida's first semester teaching at Yale. This was a very exciting time. His lectures were a major event on campus; everyone turned out for them. That fall he lectured on Heidegger on Mondays and Francis Ponge on Wednesdays—a surprising combination: two writers with very different approaches to "the thing."

Yes, listening to Derrida was a very important part of my intellectual life over the years.

P. As I remember reading *Of Grammatology*—which climaxes in the tour de force of Derrida's reading of Rousseau, with its pathos of the missing point of origin—the book has great emotional power as well as intellectual interest.

J. I think so. It's certainly true that Derrida is an extraordinarily skillful writer, and in his early writings there is some pathos of the loss of origin or center or presence. But this writing also exults in facing that loss—of the origins we only believed we had. Derrida is a writer deeply invested in the ability of language to generate thought, not simply to represent what has already been thought, and his writing gains power from that. Reading him is often a difficult experience, but that is part of its intensity. His writing is challenging and exhilarating, and I think people who persevere beyond the enigmatical opening of essays discover that it is also very pedagogical writing, well orchestrated to lead you forward.

P. Tell about how you discovered the famous post card of Socrates and Plato.

J. My wife Cynthia Chase and I had noticed in the gift shop of the Bodleian Library a remarkable reproduction of an illustration from a medieval manuscript, which shows Plato standing behind a seated Socrates and dictating to Socrates, who is writing. Now Socrates is traditionally presented as the pure philosopher who only thinks and speaks but does not write, but in *Of Grammatology* Derrida argues for the theoretical priority of writing to speech—that speech depends upon qualities generally attributed to writing. The idea of a pure thought that dispenses with writing is part of the myth of speech he seeks to overturn. We thought he would find this postcard intriguing, and when we gave him a tour of Oxford we pointed it out. The rest is history: he took this image and made it the reference point for an important book, *La Carte Postale*.

P. You spent eleven years in England in all. Why did you decide to return to the States?

J. By the mid 1970s the States had changed—much less jingoistic than in the Vietnam years, when I left. I spent a term at Yale as a visiting professor in 1975, and that experience convinced me it was probably time to come back to the United States. There was growing interest in theory here and a lot of exciting intellectual activity. In addition, for my job in England I actually taught more lectures and seminars than were required, since literary theory did need to be taught in Oxford. It was a great relief when I got to Yale and was teaching only two courses, which gave me a great deal of freedom and made it possible to align teaching and research.

P. Cornell was your first tenured appointment in the United States. How did that come about?

J. I'd met Neil Hertz earlier when I was teaching in Cambridge in England; he appeared at my door one day because he's read an article of mine on Flaubert and thought it might be nice to talk, which it certainly was. So I knew Neil already, and Phil Lewis and Richard Klein in the French Department. The prospect of being their colleague was very attractive. I gather Scott Elledge in the English Department read *Structuralist Poetics* (which had just come out), gave it to Mike Abrams, and Abrams liked it also, so they invited me to give a talk, and I was offered a position in the English Department. I naively told myself that I wouldn't need to get much involved in the English Department since my real field was Comparative Literature. I had simultaneously an offer from University of California, Irvine, but it was just a building site at that time. Cornell was clearly more attractive. And I've been here ever since.

P. That's thirty years. Why did you never decide to leave?

J. Cornell was intellectually a very stimulating place in the 1970s and 1980s, with colleagues in other departments—Romance Studies, Anthropology, Classics, and the group around the journal *Diacritics*, with which I was involved. We were in the forefront of the theory revolution. Ithaca itself has many attractions and it has improved over the years. The English Department has been, in fact, a welcoming department; even in the days when the so-called "theory wars" were raging elsewhere, in the Cornell

English AT CORNELL

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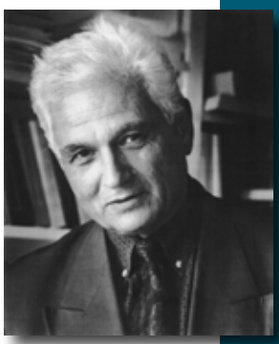
Office of Publications and Marketing
11/2007 5M SL 070611

department we were able to get along pretty well with each other. I think Mike Abrams set an example: when, for instance, he was attacking Hillis Miller in print, he was nevertheless supportive of people here whose work was closer to Miller's than to his. I have great fondness for Cornell and considerable admiration for the department and for the humanities in general here, though I regret that our humanist administrators have devoted themselves to trying to build up the social sciences rather than preserving and building on our strengths in the humanities.

P. In the popular reception of deconstruction in the United States, theory is something scandalous and threatening, something you fall for or run from. I recall one magazine article that featured a photo of Derrida posed as a bandit, as if he were about to rob the palace of culture.

J. It's certainly true that his—and other—forms of theoretical writing were a challenge to English departments. They proposed new questions as well as new readings, often difficult. And if you resisted you were identifying yourself as retrograde and old guard. I can sympathize today with those who then hoped this new theory thing would dissipate—I'm not especially eager at my age to engage with complicated new discourses. That sort of resistance to theory and to change was understandable.


Jacques Derrida

On the other hand, the right-wing attempt to characterize deconstruction and other forms of theory as destructive of Western culture and subversive of Western civilization is something I've always found puzzling and to a certain extent in bad faith, since it's Derrida more than anyone else who got students and faculty in literature departments reading Plato or Kant. He brought them to explore classic philosophical texts whose meaning people previously assumed they knew. Derrida's rereading of major texts of Western culture has reinvigorated the humanities, and his engagement with literary works has never been a debunking of literature but always a celebration of the shrewdness and rhetorical and imaginative resourcefulness of literature. The right-wing claim that students would read Derrida and deconstruction and become turned off from literature proves false. On the contrary, students exposed to deconstruction have taken a heightened interest in literary and philosophical texts—with different questions, certainly.

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"Poetry makes nothing happen"

This excerpt from the essay is reprinted with permission from the edited collection Do the Humanities Have to Be Useful? *(© Cornell University, 2006). The title quotes W. H. Auden's famous line from "In Memory of W.B. Yeats (d. 1939)," which also includes the lines "it survives,/A way of happening,/A mouth." Jonathan's essay, which turns into a commentary on a poem by his late colleague, might alternately be titled "In Memory of A.R. Ammons." His final phrase, "poems are good to think with," puns on the anthropologist Claude Levi-Strauss's phrase "bonnes a penser" ("goods to think with"), his description of the way humans create meaning by organizing familiar objects into relations of similarity and opposition.*

Auden still found a use for poetry. Can it survive today as a way of happening? Cornell's deeply-mourned poet A. R. Ammons, who died in 2001, won the National Book Award in 1993 for his book length poem, *Garbage*.

> garbage has to be the poem of our time because
> garbage is spiritual, believable enough
>
> to get our attention, getting in the way, piling
> up, stinking, turning brooks brownish and
>
> creamy white: what else deflects us from the
> errors of our illusionary ways, not a temptation
>
> to trashlessness, that is too far off, and,
> anyway, unimaginable, unrealistic:

Garbage is concrete and familiar, unavoidable, reminding us always of transitoriness—even the most obdurate objects have become garbage in the dump. And so it is a spiritual category for our time, one that engulfs everything ("mess with a nice dinner long enough, it's garbage"). Garbage is all the discrete objects in landfills and the most general, realistic name for the transitoriness of people and things—the poem of our time, indeed. This wry, eloquent, colloquial, surprisingly cheerful, even jokey poem strings together all sorts of material in long sentences continued by one colon after another (seldom a period in this 100-page poem; all flow rather than structure). These colon sequences are cast in unrhymed couplets that provide an expectation of form: you slow down at line endings but the uncompleted sentences pull you forward as the poem flows from page to page.

The poem begins with a huge garbage dump in Florida:

> the garbage trucks crawl as if in obeisance,
> as if up ziggurats toward the high places gulls
>
> and garbage keep alive, offerings to the gods
> of garbage, of retribution, of realistic
>
> expectation, the deities of unpleasant
> necessities: refined, young earthworms,

This is the modern temple of sacrifice, with the bulldozer operator as the presiding priest, but Ammons insists,

> this is a scientific poem
>
> asserting that nature models values, that we
> have invented little (copied), reflections of
>
> possibilities already here, this is where we came
> to and how we came: a priestly director behind the
>
> black-chuffing dozer leans the gleanings
> and reads the birds

He reads the circling birds like a soothsayer.

The poem, one might say, explores the relation between three systems:

• a scientific model, in which "garbage" is the name of a temporary stage in the endless transformations of matter and energy. Mass is just a form of energy. Garbage is nothing special, certainly not tragic.

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A Chapbook for David Skorton

On September 6, 2007, David Skorton was officially inaugurated twelfth president of Cornell University. On each of the chairs set out for guests at the ceremony lay a copy of a chapbook entitled *Like a Fragile Index of the World:*

Poems for David Skorton, selected for the occasion by Alice Fulton, the Ann S. Bowers Professor of English.

The idea of a chapbook was especially fitting, since the new president, a medical researcher by training and a jazz trumpeter by avocation, is also an enthusiast of the humanities. In researching her selections, Alice drew upon Cornellians past and present, including present colleagues in the English Department but reaching back as well into historical time (Hu Shih, Nabokov), to the recent past (A.R. Ammons), to those who have been widely celebrated, and to many who have been neglected. It is therefore an imaginative and varied collection, both a celebration of an occasion and of a legacy. It was perhaps partly as a result of *Like a Fragile Index of the World* that the new president chose English as the first department he visited in his new job.

Meredith Ramirez Talusan, the assistant editor of this issue, has chosen eight poems of the chapbook's 36. Five of the eight authors are present members of the MFA program: Fulton, Kenneth McClane, Lyrae van Clief-Stefanon, Phyllis Janowitz, and Robert Morgan. Elizabeth Holmes, a graduate of the MFA program, is author most recently of *The Playhouse Near Dark,* a collection of poems on raising two young boys. Emily Rosko, also a graduate of the program, won the 2005 Iowa Poetry Prize for her first collection, *Raw Goods Inventory.* Fred Muratori, librarian and bibliographer at Cornell University Library, is author of two poetry collections, *The Possible* and *Despite Repeated Warnings.*

Evanescence

Phyllis Janowitz

I'd like to speak of that word,
seldom discussed yet immanent as meteorites
streaking in daylight, or ultra violet rays—

evasive, invasive, defying nets the way
some viruses slip through a filter—
we always suspected their presence

years ago, before the advent of virtuoso
electronic microscopes—and even so, so
many particles, tinier and trickier than

tics or quicksilver, practice legerdemain
why waste time looking for them? Oh
I'd say let it go, but for a claim

this ephemeral, what a grip it has.
A python's constriction is less terrible.
And although we have no proof

the homily is true: people do die from it—
but no one wants to believe this, this
slow distillation around us, neighbors

and lovers disappearing in silence, one
by one, by one—and hardly any notice
taken—a few sly tears sliding through

then we put away our Kleenex and continue—
father, mother, friends vanishing as though
flesh-eating pathogens dined before dawn.

Where are the authorities? Why
will no one impartial tell them
(would one fixed star fall from its purple cradle?)

such deletions are definitely not acceptable:
are, in fact (please don't say it)
intolerable.

The Meaning Box

Fred Muratori

Remove the lid—and nothing.
While we were dreaming
or debating, it escaped.
Its damp scent lingers in the air.

What now? The box looks bigger
in sunlight, and bottomless,
ever emptier with each minute,
an accelerating vacuum.

What could we gather to fill it?
Not the churning matter of stars,
not our own misunderstood lives.
What can be done beyond begin?

Here—a eucalyptus branch,
a battered violin, a drop
of human blood. And words,
certainly, but in no certain order.

Taking a History

Elizabeth Holmes

On the nurse's chart I am the point
everything descends to:
my parents' blood pressure, grandmother's
stroke, even the cancer that took
a grandfather thirty years before
my birth. When I say my father is
eighty and strong, how kindly she says,
Bless his heart, and smiles. As though
his heart goes on for us—
for her own quiet presence,
for mine, ungainly on the white table.

The Doptone picks up the tap
of a pea-sized muscle, afloat
in sea-belly—through liquid static
a rolling crackle like cosmonaut voices
over the gelled silence of space.
My second heart—and so *fast,*
as if some part of me is rowing
hard against the salt stuff of our
most ancient navigation.
And I become this dull
slow boom, haunting the background.

Ithaca

Lyrae Van Clief-Stefanon

"I'll dig in,
into my days, having come here to live, not visit."
—Denise Levertov

Walking away from it
I think I am this close
to the highway. I am close enough
to see it—and farther
—still—

then
to hear it. The field—

shoulder high grass, wild
flowers, curves me
out of earshot. One carves

a trail, or treks, hikes
—skirt gathered
up into balled fists
between

thighs in high grass
in hot weather—the route
already blazed with white

flashes—.
I am not married
to this place. Some other
yes draws me—
the way train tracks marry

the trail over the inlet
here—steel—
will over water.
Walking towards—

conflation of
arrival, creation—
here and out here
where

walking out
to discover anything

but corporeality is bunk.
I woke this morning—
wed

to the idea of setting—
copse dampening
what's left of

road noise—
the central narrative
an absence—

carved out—here—
another marker
a hidden falls
—sound.

The Glowworm

For Sonny Stitt

Kenneth A. McClane

The glowworm works up the barren limb
like a fragile index of the world:

This is not his poem: he sings
for himself:

The poem here is the singing
of the glowworm, how he struggles up

The next section of bark
stretching like an accordion, his

mind seething with his body's
thumbless design:

But this is not his poem: it is about
lovers: it is about sound and sense and

sound sense (in-sense incense innocence): it is
about games and lovers: it is about

the struggle to be perfect, to make
that love inviolable, sacred: it is about

the poet who needs language
who needs the world, who needs

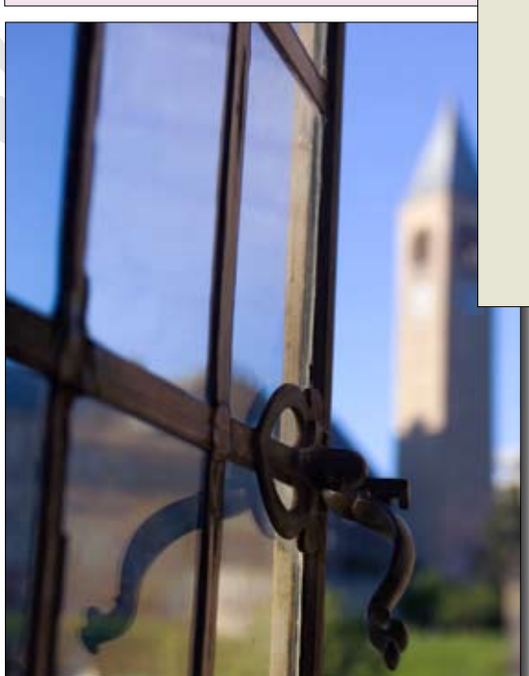
words to love him: it is about
love, vast love, love of meaning's

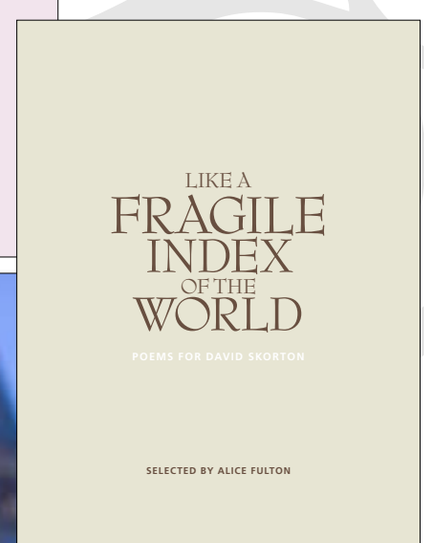
love: it is about the soul
which speaks beyond sense, which

flushes like a quail
after a startling: it is about love

the love of the smallest
darting, the imperfect journey, the glow

glowing glowworm, worthy of itself,
and worthy then of singing





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A Chapbook for David Skorton continued from page 5

Slate

Alice Fulton

Neither pigeon, taupe, nor coal
black. Not a braille
pen embossing points on bond, the entrants
in a race, record of events, or gray
scales meshed in roofs.
Not "to foreordain." But
all of the above, the future
scrubbed with fleshburn brush,
threshold unscented by event as
yet, the premise, the blackboard's
dense blank screen, un-
reckoned rock complexion, the tablet un-
chalked with take and scene, opposite of
has-been, antonym to fixed, the
breadth of before, before
-lessness links with hope or mind or
flesh, when all is
-ful, -able, and -or, as
color, as galore, as before

words. The above,
yes, and beyond
measure—unstinting
sky, green fire of cornfields, the how
many husks clasping how
many cells, the brain to say
rich, new, if, and
swim in possibility, as it is and
ever more shall be, to fold, to
origami thought,
look, no shears or hands, the
blizzard, unabridged, within the black dilated iris
core and hold
it—little pupil can—in mind, in utero,
sculpt the is, the am.

Weather Inventions

Emily Rosko

Turbulent presence,
(who has seen?)

the wind's mosaics: triangular
crests, cat's-paws, the marbled

look of approach. Beneath
the sand, black rock

pocked, brittle as any
roughly handled thing. Weather-

worsted sea-bank, purple jellies
strewn petal-like. Capillary to white-

cap: spillover from a gale's
fetch. The water throws

diamonds neither you nor I
can count. A passing note,

when exhale becomes exalt
(it whirleth about continually).

The shallows drawn aside:
a fluke, a dividing of

the Gulf of Suez. Disobedient
form, "to imagine is to see."

Rearview Mirror

Robert Morgan

This little pool in the air is
not a spring but sink into which
trees and highway, bank and fields are
sipped away to minuteness. All
split on the present then merge in
stretched perspective, radiant in
reverse, the wide world guttering
back to one lit point, as our way
weeps away to the horizon
in this eye where the past flies ahead.

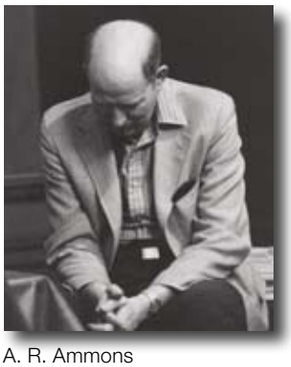
On Taking Thought continued from page 3

More generally, I would say that theory does not treat literary works as cultural monuments but as sites of conflict—which makes them all the more interesting.

P. In your most recent book, *The Literary in Theory,* you define theory not as one mode among others but as the space where discussion of literature takes place today, which I think is indisputable. Has "theory" then simply become the nickname for criticism in general, or does it still have a specific definition?

J. There used to be a subject, called theory of literature, which asked questions about the nature and function of literature, the number and characteristics of literary genres, and so forth. What's striking about the body of work that tends to be called "theory" these days is that it often does not seem greatly interested in those kinds of questions (though I think it should be) but focuses on other political, philosophical, linguistic, and ethical questions—about meaning, identity, power, and the political implications of various discursive practices. "Theory" thus has been an interdisciplinary body of work—that's one of its defining features: a discourse that may arise in another discipline and become relevant and provoke thought within the realm of literary studies. This makes theory hard to define because it is often not clear why certain works of sociology, historiography, or philosophy have come to count as "theory" and others haven't. They still can come to count as theory, of course, when claims are made for their seminal importance.

Theory is also interdisciplinary; it is self-reflective, seeking to stand outside itself and understand its functioning as thought, and it is speculative, in that it does not offer demonstrations but rather reframings, in a generalizing discourse that offer hypotheses that by nature can't be demonstrated one way or another. Theory proposes new ways of looking at cultural phenomena, often generalized from particularly engaging investigation. What comes to count as theory are those reframings that others find intellectually profitable, reconceptualizations that "take."


A. R. Ammons

P. In the delightful essay [accompanying] that you wrote on our late colleague A. R. Ammons, one of your favorite poets, you take up the question, "Can poetry be useful?" and you start with Auden's famous line "Poetry makes nothing happen." You don't take that line to mean that poetry has no effects at all, even though it may have no direct and obvious consequences of the sort that a traditional humanism might want to claim for it. Can theory be "useful" in any sense?

J. I think the consequences of literary discourse are extremely varied. Certainly literature is not always progressive; it can minister to the status quo and help people take social arrangements as natural, but it can also be highly subversive, both thematically by enabling people to see things otherwise, to experience the world from the vantage-point of people who are differently situated, and in its work on language, which resists or seeks to transform the cliché, the normal ways of thinking, and provoke imaginative possibilities. In its work on language it enacts a utopian impulse to try something new.

As for recent theory, it especially has been a putting into question of what is seen as natural and commonsensical. The exposure of the "natural" as a historical product that could have been different and therefore could be different in the future has important potential consequences in social and political realms. Perhaps the most obvious examples are ideas about gender and sexuality and identity, which theory has challenged in various ways. Feminist theory and then queer theory can stand as models of ways in which theory—or here I should say "theoretical debates," for the vitality of these domains lies in disagreements and alternatives—can promote change.

Doing theory involves skepticism about received wisdom, a curiosity about alternative ways of thinking, an attraction to the power of ideas that move self-reflexively to take in a larger picture, and perhaps a sense that a thought is valuable when it is taken as far as it can go.

Poetry continued from page 3

• the redemptive, human model of sacrifice that extracts value, seeks dialectical transumption
• the process of poetry itself, which is figured as a form of garbage management:

> poetry is itself like an installation at Marine
> Shale: it reaches down into the dead pit
> and cool oil of stale recognition and words and
> brings up hauls of stringy gook which it arrays
> with light and strings with shiny syllables and
> gets the mind back into vital relationship with
> communication channels:

Can poetry mediate between the scientific and the spiritual? Poetry itself is represented as a transmutation of energy:

> there is a mound,
> too, in the poet's mind dead language is hauled
> off to and burned down on, the energy held and
> shaped into new turns and clusters,

The reduction to garbage can yield energy, and this is seen as a form of redemption, as the poem continues

> for
> where but in the very asshole of comedown is
> redemption:...
> where but in the arrangements love crawls us
> through, not a thing left in our self-display
> unhumiliated, do we find the sweet seed of
> new routes:

Yeats noted that "Love has pitched his mansion in the place of excrement," but Ammons's poem denies that such cycles of redemption are a transcendence of nature:

> but we are natural: nature, not
> we, gave rise to us:

And poems themselves are seen as concretions of matter, not transcendent but only, on occasion, particularly slow to break down:

> poems themselves
> processing, revitalizing so much dead material
> become a dead-material concentrate time's
> longest actions sometimes can't dissolve: not
> to worry:

Ironically troping on the idea that poems will outlast gilded monuments, suggesting that they survive only as particularly refractory concentrates of dead matter, this poem, with its remarkable juxtapositions, the intermingling of the high and low, the interweaving of the literary and the scientific, and its astounding inventiveness, could serve us as one modern parable for the humanities, in its negotiation of the meaning of scientific accounts. As it engages the issues of our condition, testing possibilities of thought and evaluative strategies, turning them round, resisting easy lines of escape, does it make something happen? At the very least, Ammons's poem, like Auden's, which is still going strong, survives in the valley of its saying, as a way of happening, offering readers a singular experience and showing us that poems are good to think with.

Letter from the Chair

Last year was extraordinary for the English Department. Not only were we able to appoint a total of seven new faculty members (certainly a record for recent years), but we began a new, high-profile visiting writer series with the aid of a generous gift from anonymous donors. And we finally have an enhanced department website. The new faculty, Creative Writing reading series, and visiting writer appointments have generated an unusual number of public events.

In cooperation with our colleagues in Africana Studies and Feminist, Gender & Sexuality Studies, we have made three major senior appointments. Professor Grant Farred, most recently on the faculty of Duke University, is the author of *What's My Name? Black Vernacular Intellectuals* (2003) and *Midfielder's Moment: Coloured Literature and Culture in Contemporary South Africa* (1999), and is completing a third book, *Bodies in Motion, Bodies at Rest,* forthcoming in 2008. Professor Carol Boyce Davies, a Caribbeanist most recently on the faculty of Florida International University, is the author of *Black Women, Writing and Identity: Migrations of the Subject* (1994) and *Left of Karl Marx: Claudia Jones, Black/Communist Woman* (forthcoming 2007). She currently is working on a volume of personal reflections, *Caribbean Spaces: Between the Twilight Zone and the Underground Railroad*. And Associate Professor Jane Juffer, a specialist in U.S. cultural studies, is the author of *At Home with Pornography: Women, Sex, and Everyday Life* (1998) and *Single Mother: The Emergence of the Domestic Intellectual* (2006).

We also were delighted to appoint three junior professorial faculty members and, in cooperation with the John S. Knight Writing Program, one senior lecturer. Assistant Professor Jenny Mann, who received her PhD from Northwestern University and was a Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow at Cornell's Society for the Humanities, is completing a book, *Outlaw Rhetoric: Fashioning Vulgar Eloquence in Early Modern England*. Kevin Attell, whose PhD is from Berkeley, is working on two books—one on the encyclopedic novel in the twentieth century, the other on the relations between theories by the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben and the French philosopher Jacques Derrida. Assistant Professor Jeremy Braddock is finishing a book, *The Modernist Collector and Black Modernity, 1914–1934*. He has edited a collection of essays on Hollywood "B" movies and has published articles on the Black Atlantic and African-American modernism. David Faulkner received his PhD in English from Princeton University and is a specialist in the teaching of college-level writing.

The new Creative Writing reading series, combined with several other individual sponsored readings, began with a bang in the winter of 2007. The series has proved so popular that all readings now take place in large auditoriums rather than the English Department lounge. Visitors for fall 2007 include poets Willie Perdomo and Gabrielle Calvocoressi and eminent fiction writers Sandra Cisneros, Sir Salman Rushdie, and William Kennedy. In the spring, poets Mark Doty and Paul Lisicky and fiction writer Denis Johnson join the faculty for what promises to be an amazing semester.

The new M.H. Abrams Distinguished Visiting Professorship allows us to bring in renowned senior academics who have much to say both to our students and to our faculty. Our first Abrams Professor was Sandra Gilbert, a student of Mike's who is famous as a foundational feminist literary critic and is also a major poet; her joint reading with Mike Abrams this past January is described on page 9.

Besides the anonymous gift for the Creative Writing Lecture Series, we have received important smaller gifts from friends of the Cornell English Department. We are especially grateful to Cynthia Leder, who created an endowment that will add to the Chair's Discretionary Fund. This fund helps co-sponsor numerous conferences and lecturers on campus each year, an increasing number in residence halls. It provides a regular budget for our very active Undergraduate Literature Club, which sponsors book-club gatherings, film screenings, and open-mic evenings at which students can read aloud their own poetry and fiction. Most recently the Chair's Discretionary Fund has been able to restore money for Take Your Students Out for Pizza, a program that has supported many informal gatherings of undergraduates and faculty in the past. Contributions to this fund continue to be welcome.

I invite you to take some time to explore the department's website, a work in progress that is developing all the time. You'll find pictures of our new faculty at www.arts.cornell.edu/english/_old/new-faculty-07.html. Personal faculty websites are emerging one by one, attached to the faculty directory at www.arts.cornell.edu/english/about/faculty_directory. Former chair Laura Brown and our redoubtable Administrative Manager Marianne Marsh have done excellent work helping professionals design this site. Keep an eye on it.

Molly Hite

Sandra Cisneros is a novelist, poet, short story writer and essayist whose work gives voice to working-class Latino and Latina life in America. Her reading was part of the Creative Writing Program's Fall 2007 Reading Series.

Distinguished Visitor, Distinguished Mentor

Lectures come and go in the English Department, but it isn't often that familial bonds are invoked so frequently as they were this past January 29. On a cold winter afternoon in the Hollis E. Cornell Auditorium, before a packed audience of students, colleagues, and guests, the distinguished feminist critic Sandra Gilbert recounted how her "all-time favorite professor" M.H. Abrams insisted that she call him Mike when they saw each other at conferences. (Gilbert joked that all she could muster was "Uncle Mike.")

The occasion inaugurated the M.H. Abrams Distinguished Visiting Professorship. The choice of Gilbert as first recipient was fitting because Abrams conceived and edited *The Norton Anthology of English Literature,* which has become the standard text in universities across the country, while Gilbert (with her long-time professional partner Susan Gubar) is introducing a new generation of students to a different kind of canon with *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women.* Her and Gubar's first book, *The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination* (1979), was a foundational study for the emerging field of feminist literary scholarship. The memoir *Wrongful Death: A Medical Tragedy* (1995) and the recent *Death's Door: Modern Dying and the Ways We Grieve* (2006) helped set up the graduate seminar on literary approaches to death and grieving that she went on to teach that spring.

On the occasion of the joint lectures, Gilbert and Abrams paid homage to each other with a degree of warmth and respect that would touch any student who has developed a strong bond with a teacher, as most everyone in the room surely had.

Gilbert began by listing feminist writers and critics who had been mentored by Abrams at one point or another—scholars such as Americanist Nina Baym, queer theorist Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, postcolonial thinker Gayatri Spivak, early modernist Margaret Ferguson, and science fiction writer Joanna Russ. She added: "I can only hope that what I have to say to you today along with what I teach in my classes will be in some small way worthy of everything I learned about reading and writing, teaching and thinking from Professor Abrams."

Abrams responded by a disavowal: "You have grossly exaggerated my influence. But I will find it in my heart to forgive you!" He then called Gilbert "the shining star" among his students and said: "I didn't set out to make any of them feminists. They were just so damned intelligent and able and contentious that they found their own way into that kind of work."

The themes of homage and family showed not only in what Gilbert and Abrams had to say about each other but also in the spirit of their remarks on literature. In her lecture "Finding Atlantis: Thirty Years of Exploring Women's Literary Traditions in English," Gilbert posited Atlantis as a lost continent that represents a women's literary canon of English literature. She linked women writers' yearning for literary ancestors in the depths of time to the search of feminist critics for mentorship through example. Of course Gilbert has herself been a scholarly parent to subsequent generations of feminist critics, some of whom were in attendance. Abrams' own lecture, "Reading Poetry Aloud," showed how his passion for literature inspired a host of former students. "It is the nature of the poem that it comes into full existence only briefly and sporadically in the act of reading it aloud or hearing someone else read it aloud," he began. He then brought memorably into existence poems by Keats, Wordsworth, A.R. Ammons, and others, using subtle modulations of voice and a minute attention to rhythms and pauses to show how the sensitive enunciation of a poem can be an act of literary interpretation.

It so happens that Sandra's son, Roger Gilbert, is a professor in the English Department, while Stephen Weiss, the former chairman of Cornell's Board of Trustees who endowed the M.H. Abrams Distinguished Visiting Professorship, was one of Sandra's classmates. These connections only heightened what must have been sensed by everyone in the audience by the time dusk had turned to night: the Cornell English Department felt like family.

"I can only hope that what I have to say to you today along with what I teach in my classes will be in some small way worthy of everything I learned about reading and writing, teaching and thinking from Professor Abrams."

Faculty Notes

Jami Carlacio's collection *The Fiction of Toni Morrison: Teaching and Writing on Race, Culture, and Identity* appeared this year from the National Council of Teachers of English. **Jonathan Culler**'s *The Literary in Theory* appeared in 2007 from Stanford University Press, as well as the four-volume work from Routledge, *Structuralism: Critical Concepts,* which he edited. **Elizabeth DeLoughrey**'s *Routes and Roots: Navigating Carribean and Pacific Island Literatures* is appearing this year from University of Hawai'i Press. **Alice Fulton**'s poem "A.M.: The Hopeful Monster" appeared last year in *The Pushcart Book of Poetry: The Best Poems from Thirty Years of the Pushcart Prize.* **Andy Galloway**'s *Medieval Literature and Culture* appeared last year from Continuum Books. **Roger Gilbert** wrote the preface to the 2006 Norton edition of A.R. Ammons's *Ommateum.* **Molly Hite** wrote the introduction and annotations to a new edition of Virginia Woolf's *The Waves* from Harcourt/Harvest. **Wendy Jones**'s *Consensual Fictions: Women, Liberalism, and the English Novel* appeared in 2005 from the University of Toronto Press. **Reyna Kalas**'s *Frames, Glass, Verse: The Technology of Poetic Invention in the English Renaissance* appeared this year from Cornell University Press. **J. Robert Lennon** published three short stories in *Playboy* and released *American Recluse,* a volume of original music under the name Inverse Room. **Dan McCall**'s *Ernest Hemingway* is forthcoming from Oxford University Press. **Satya Mohanty** is co-editor of *The Future of Diversity: Academic Leaders Reflect on American Higher Education,* forthcoming from Palgrave-MacMillan. **Robert Morgan**'s *Boone: A Biography* appears this fall from Algonquin Books. **Neil Saccamano** co-edited *Politics and Passions, 1500–1850,* which was published by Princeton University Press last year. **Helena Viramontes**'s second novel, *Their Dogs Came With Them,* appeared this year from Atrias/Simon & Schuster.

Elizabeth Deloughrey, in addition to her promotion to associate professor, has received the Global Fellows Award from the International Institute of the University of California, Los Angeles. **Roger Gilbert** received a National Humanities Center fellowship for 2007–2008. **Thomas Hill** received the Russell Distinguished Teaching Award last spring. **Robert Morgan** received the 2007 Academy Award by the American Academy of Arts and Letters. **Ernesto Quiñonez** received the Latino Book Award for *Chango's Fire* in 2005. **Helena Viramontes** received the American Association of Hispanics in Higher Education Award for Literary Contribution this year.

Finally, a salute to **Douglas Mao**, who begins a new appointment as associate professor of English at Johns Hopkins University after four years on the faculty at Cornell. A superb administrator, advisor, and director of undergraduate studies as well as a brilliant teacher and scholar, Doug's energy, warmth, and collegiality will be sorely missed.

NEW FACULTY Members

Philip Lorenz joins the Cornell faculty as an assistant professor after completing his PhD at New York University in 2004. His forthcoming book, *The Tears of Sovereignty: Perspectives of Power in Renaissance Drama* (Fordham University Press), encapsulates much of his work in the field by comparing texts and traditions of the early modern English and Spanish theatres from interlocking theoretical perspectives. He combines the tropological approach of deconstruction with political and feminist approaches influenced by such figures as Adriana Cavarero and Giorgio Agamben. He specializes in the literature of early modern England and the history of drama. His teaching this year includes a course on the nature of the enemy in plays from Shakespeare to August Wilson and a graduate seminar on theater and the question of sovereignty.

Dagwami Woubshet received his PhD in the history of American civilization from Harvard University in 2007 and joins the Cornell faculty as an assistant professor. His research deals with AIDS-related literature and visual art as well as queer and African literature and theory more generally. His book-in-progress, *Figurations of Catastrophe: the Poetics and Politics of AIDS Loss,* is a comparative study of responses to the AIDS crisis in the United States and South Africa, focusing on poetic elegies. It proceeds from readings of literary and visual artworks to a consideration of the political representation of AIDS in both countries. At Cornell his teaching extends his research interests: Literatures of the Black Atlantic, which considers modern diasporic literatures from Africa, the Caribbean, and the United States; Narratives of Loss—AIDS; and a course on American literature in the 1980s.

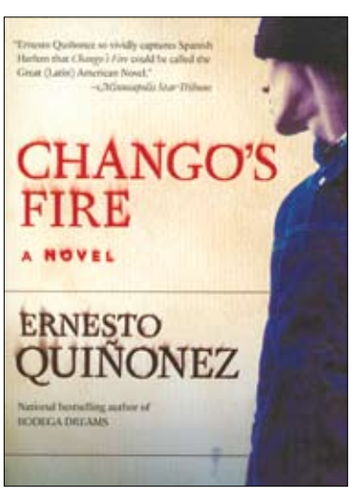
Carin Ruff is a former rare-book librarian who plans to teach courses in textual studies and the history of the book as an assistant professor in the English Department, as well as Medieval Latin and Paleography for the Medieval Studies program. She received her PhD in medieval studies from the University of Toronto in 2001. Her current book project is a study of narrative strategies in historical writing of the Anglo-Saxon period.

New Faculty:

Ernesto Quiñonez and J. Robert Lennon

Ernesto Quiñonez's first ambition was to paint; now he paints mainly with words.

"That's how I write my novels," he explained in a recent conversation with English at Cornell and his new colleague, John (J. Robert) Lennon. "I start with the landscape first, then work towards the characters. At first I felt I wasn't good enough as a writer; I wrote lots of junk until I wrote *Bodega Dreams.* It felt true and honest to me—a vision of what we could be and could do. It's really a re-writing of *The Great Gatsby.*" The novel, which is set in New York City in a neighborhood like the one Ernesto grew up in, already has been translated into several languages, though attempts at translating the colloquial English title vary considerably (in Spanish it's *El Barrio del Gran Gatsby,* The Great Gatsby's Neighborhood).



His second published book, *Chango's Fire,* is also set in New York City. "Sociologically, it's what happened to neighborhoods like Spanish Harlem when values fell so low landlords preferred burning their properties to renting them. Ghettoes aren't a thing of the past, though gentrification has happened fast in the bigger cities. It's as though people said, 'Let's get rid of the ghettoes.' So now it's Starbuck's and a Rite-Aid, a Starbuck's and a Rite-Aid. It's not my town any more."

Does he like Ithaca better?

"It's liveable," he said drily. "It's very different. I like Cornell."

"It has a fantastic writing faculty," he and John both said at once.

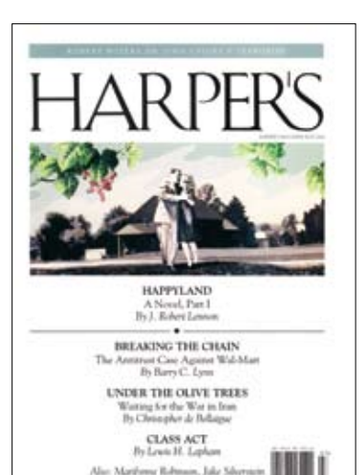
John came to Ithaca after years of wandering from his home state of New Jersey. He met his wife Rhian in Montana and they moved back to the East Coast, looking for towns with good libraries where the real estate was cheap. He worked as a free-lance writer and visiting teacher of writing for several years before joining Cornell full-time.

His stories have been published in *The New Yorker* and elsewhere; his books include the novels *The Funnies* and *Mailman,* and a collection of very short stories called *Pieces for the Left Hand.* His latest novel, *Happyland,* was the first book serialized by *Harper's* magazine since Norman Mailer in the early 1970s.

How did that happen?

"Only after I had nearly given up on publishing it," he explained. "It ended up being in serial form because of publishers' fear of being sued." The plot resembles the career of the woman who founded the American Girl dolls. Novelists, it seems, can be sued by real people for writing works of fiction. "I was playing off real-life situations but the characters are imaginary. In fact I didn't know anything about the real person—only the story of the person who bought American Girl dolls. I made a character of a doll company CEO and asked myself what that would be like. It turned out I got it all wrong."

John's current project is "a book about weird solitude, sort of Jack London meets Stephen King. It's ostensibly about a guy who finds a castle in the woods, and secretly about the Iraq war." At least it follows the recurrent themes of John's other fiction, which he summed up cheerfully: "Hostility and resentment. Intimidation. Embarrassment. The psychological roots of physical aggression."



John described his first novel, *The Light of Falling Stars,* as his effort to learn how to do what other writers did: "I figured out how to bring inspiration into writing, though the book feels schematic to me now."

Can a writer plan inspiration?

"I couldn't relax until I had a structure of narrative. Then the real feelings came out when I relaxed. I need a detailed outline first, so I can abandon it later."

"I don't write that way but I like that idea," Ernesto said. "Basically, with writing, you write maps of where you've never been. But then what happens is that life takes you on other directions, away from your books. And you have to reel yourself back to the work. I don't see writers as any different than let's say, bus drivers. It's a job and you do it. If bus drivers would wait for inspiration or a big grant or only drive the bus when their love lives are in order, no one would ever get to work."

Ernesto's first (unpublished) attempt at fiction was inspired by Camus's *The Stranger,* which he admired "because of the minimalist prose and the voice of the existentialist—the man who, because he does not have a country, has no center to locate his place in the universe and therefore has become an emotionless robot."

Writing about Spanish-speaking people doesn't mean Ernesto sees himself mainly as an "ethnic" writer—any more than one would consider Saul Bellow, Philip Roth, Joseph Heller, and Barnard Malamud as simply Jewish writers. "Today, no one in their right mind would think of teaching American literature without mentioning those writers. They are 'literature'—part of the canon. Latino literature is poised to achieve the same recognition. I see myself as just another cog in making that transition happen."

If *Chango's Fire* and *Happyland* are any indication, the American canon is in good hands.

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Readings by Writers

This past year saw the first of a dramatically expanded Creative Writing series, sponsored in part by generous donations from two Cornell alumni, that featured readings by ten visiting writers in all. The following personal report was written by the assistant editor of this issue of English at Cornell.

When Junot Díaz invited me to salsa with him at a noisy bar, I had this sudden image in my head of my MFA professors at the faculty club, surrounded by white cloth and wood paneling. They were persuading a white-haired widow to fund a new reading series so that students like me can have close contact with notable writers outside Cornell. This was probably not the kind of contact they had in mind, but I wasn't about to stop myself.

By then, Díaz's residency had already given me and my fellow MFA writers plenty of insight. The author of the acclaimed story collection *Drown* and the soon-to-be-released *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* not only conducted a special workshop for us where we submitted stories-in-progress but also solicited finished manuscripts for consideration at *The Boston Review,* where he is the fiction editor. We had meals with him where he talked about his days as a grad student in our department. We attended a craft lecture where he drilled us on the importance of structure. For three days and nights, it was all-Junot all the time.

Then there was his public reading, thrown into crisis when a scheduling conflict forced its audience into the cramped English lounge. My recurring nightmare of taking a test for a class I had never attended came true when I walked into Hollis E. Cornell Auditorium and a friendly TA suggested that I find my lab partners for the biochem prelim. When the TA saw the shock on my face, he said, "Oh. You must be here for the reading. It's been moved." Díaz handled the situation with significantly more grace, reading from the room entrance so that audience members could sit on the floor around the podium and those stuck in the hall could hear him.

Maybe it was the stress, but at the end of the reception Díaz asked some of the writers if we wanted to go somewhere. Someone suggested salsa dancing at Olivia's. He not only offered me dance tips that night but gave us all a great lesson on how to keep it real, just in case we need it someday.

There are other stories, not just from me but from other members of the MFA program. I heard that David Barber, poetry editor of *The Atlantic Monthly,* conducted an amazing workshop, as did Elizabeth Alexander. There were lunches with Alice Friman and Heather McHugh. From Emily Rosko, we learned all about PhD programs in creative writing; we learned that George Saunders gives each of his characters distinctive voices when he reads.

The next series promises another batch of luminaries, among them the newly-knighted Salman Rushdie, who is probably my biggest influence. Cornell also will host Sandra Cisneros, William Kennedy, Charles Simic, Mark Doty, Paul Lisicky, and Denis Johnson. The last three will be visiting writers for all of spring semester, a situation that kept me awake one night wondering which one I would pick if I were forced to choose a class from among them. When I eventually fell asleep, I dreamt that Sir Salman was teaching me how to move in a red sari embroidered with gold thread, as we performed a musical number to the Bollywood remix of U2's "The Ground Beneath Her Feet."

Meredith Ramirez Talusan