CORNELL UNIVERSITY ENGLISH DEPARTMENT NEWSLETTER

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INSIDE ENGLISH: A NOTE FROM THE CHAIR

Talking to our alumni about the English Department seems appropriate these days. Literature departments are at the center of debates about "multiculturalism" and the "canon." How far should we go in adjusting our white-male centered curriculum to make room for work by ethnic and other minorities? Can we isolate the study of "serious" literature? Should we not read Shakespeare in the context of mass-market fiction, pop music, advertising? Does this inevitably make literary study political, and what if it does?

This is more than a legacy of the "relevance" debates of the late sixties. The continual expansion of the cultural arena now affects everything we do as a department. The old canon thrives; our two most recent appointments are in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. But there is also a concern with more recent history—Edgar Rosenberg's seminar on the literary response to Nazism and Paul Sawyer's survey of the culture of the Sixties are new this year. Thanks to Biodun Jeyifo, Ken McClane, Satya Mohanty and Harryette Mullen, we have found a real community of interest in addressing works in English by American ethnic minorities, as well as works of post-colonial and third-world cultures. Thanks to student initiative we have created and found funding for a seminar in U.S. Latino culture now in its first semester, that involves a series of visiting speakers and the cooperation of several Cornell departments and colleges.

Obviously this is only half the story. A course entitled "Video Verité" might make Quintilian (class of '49) stare and gasp, but he will recognize "Spenser and Milton." Shakespeare still takes pride of place as a subject for honors theses, though Toni Morrison or Virginia Woolf are a close second, and even the Bard is apt to be viewed through a Marxist or deconstructionist or Freudian lens. If Harryette Mullen's "Slave Narratives" is our most popular graduate course, the best seller at the 400 level is often Alison Lurie's or Tom Hill's "Children's Lit."

At that, it's easy to forget that not long ago a children's literature course would have seemed a shocking bastardization of the curriculum and a course in the movies a gut. But both are now too well established and too seriously pursued to be called "trendy." There are trends and trends, some of which we ignore at our peril. What it amounts to, I guess, is that the old English Department has become part of something larger. Some of you longed for such a department; some will find aspects of it disturbing. In either case, I hope you will be interested in knowing more about what's going on, what teachers of yours are doing and how the works that interest you are being taught these days. Please write, phone, or come and see us, in or out of class.

Pete Wetherbee

LITERACY IN HARLEM

Last summer four Cornell undergraduates worked full time to start a new family literacy program in Harlem and the South Bronx. Their idea was to read stories to the youngest children they could find—nothing fancier than that—in hopes that the children would carry home to their families a new interest in reading.

So this was a family literacy program working from the bottom up. It assumed only that young children love to hear stories and can be demanding at home—pretty safe bets. Sometimes we gave the children books to take home, provided from funds raised by various Cornell departments and individuals. We also made sure the children knew how to find the local library, and we set up a small library of our own at the Cornell Cooperative Extension Office on 7th Avenue and 125th Street in a building that used to be the Hotel Theresa.

Cooperative Extension is a name heard now and then in the Arts College, in connection with Cornell's status as a "Land-Grant Institution," but most of us in English departments have little to do with these things. So our inner-city program would have remained a Goldwin Smith pipedream had it not been for the Nutrition Program that Coop Extension runs in Harlem. I learned about the program from Joseph Holland, a Cornell Trustee who "took Shakespeare" from me years ago and who lives and practices law in Harlem. Joe knew all about Land-Grant Institutions and thought that Cornell could be doing more to help the urban

poor. I broached my project—besides I knew students at Ujamaa Residential College (where I'm a Faculty Fellow) who would be willing to work in Harlem if only we could find the money to pay them a summer wage and an agency to supervise their work. Joe told me to scare up the money myself but leave the agency to him, and he turned to Cooperative Extension at the Theresa. Would they like to have four Cornell undergraduates on their hands for the summer? Would they like to add a literacy component to their program?

The answer was "yes"—unconditionally and unanimously. The undergraduates worked with children at two homeless shelters, a housing project, a day camp, a church, and a public school. They also visited the homes of single parents who are clients in the Nutrition Program—there were children in those homes too—and it turned out that reading to the kids could lead naturally to reading recipes with the mothers. Sometimes everyone ended up cooking.

I haven't time to describe the summer in detail. We know the children loved the sessions with our students, and we know our students learned more—about children, about Harlem and the South Bronx—than they're apt to learn about anything in a comparable space of time on campus. Some teenage brothers and sisters from the housing project got excited enough about the students' work to shoulder it themselves this year. And the financial rewards have been startling.

Foundations became interested in our program—Coop Extension has obtained $25,000 from the Bowne Foundation and a promise of $150,000 from another donor to continue the program year round. Nutrition Aides from Coop Extension will replace our undergrads, and the teenagers I mentioned will be paid to read to younger kids after school and during vacations. Cornell put only $4,000 into this venture, half from the Public Service Network and half from the President's Fund for Educational Initiatives, so the return of $175,000 (4.375% in 8 months) isn't bad.

Now we hope to find four more students for next summer. And this time they will be joining an already going concern, conducted by people from the inner city.—It is a pleasure to mention the names of last summer's conductors. The undergraduates were Bemi Amusa-Shonubi, Terence Calhoun, Juan Pena, and Tracy Warner, all students at Ujamaa Residential College. Their supervisors at Coop Extension were Phyllis Pottinger and Linda Nessel.

Scott McMillin

THE CULTURE OF THE SIXTIES

Several years ago the English department approved a course I designed on the 1960's. I chose the sixties because they were a time when politics became spectacular and culture became political; and this encouraged a literature course that was at the same time a course in social history. The readings I planned (*Malcolm X*, *Ariel*, *Catch-22*, poems by Lowell, *The Armies of the Night*, *Dispatches*, along with an anthology featuring essays, manifestos, and news articles) and the viewings (*Dr. Strangelove*, *The Big Chill*, documentaries, some music and a lecture on Pop Art) could be taught in direct relation, not to all political events of the time, but to the oppositional movements identified by the phrase "the sixties," the movements that challenged the status quo in race relations, the position of women, the making of war, and most broadly the whole system—part political, part metaphysical—that disaffected young people associated with repressive forms of life.

By pre-registration some 250 students had already enrolled—which made it the largest course the department offered. (The department met the emergency by scraping up a teaching assistant and two readers and by paring the roster down to 135). Why were the students signing up in droves—even before the Gulf War broke out—to take a course on the sixties? A simple answer is that the sixties are "in" again: clothes, "classic rock," a flood of recent books and TV programs, the endless series of Vietnam movies, have reconstituted the sixties as a terrain of entertainment not unlike the Old West. But my students' interest runs deeper than fashion. They are among the first group of undergraduates without personal memory of the sixties; the time of their adolescence, the eighties, is now officially over, and they are naturally curious about the period just before their own when, as they all know, people their own age made history. My chief aim, then, is to satisfy that curiosity by simply letting them hear some distinguishing voices of the period—men and women, poets, clowns, journalists, heroes, haters.

But the students' curiosity is not simply nostalgic: for that matter, it reflects resentment of media-sponsored nostalgia. So media-sponsored nostalgia has itself been one of our subjects. I pointed out to them the double message of a recent *Newsweek* cover—"Will we ever get over the sixties?"—that attempts to banish nostalgia at the very moment it resurrects and proclaims it. I also pointed out the selective use of the term "nostalgia," exemplified by a recent counter-demonstrator in Washington whose sign read, "Go home—the sixties are over." Used in this way, the charge of "nostalgia" merely quashes dissent and ideas for reform. The value of a course on the sixties, then, must include awareness of how we remember or misremember. I want to "remember" the sixties as, among other things, a time of political possibility and political dialogue. Every feature of American life was subject to contestation, and much of that debate bore fruit—in the ecology movement, the civil rights movement, the movement for women's rights. But it may be still more important to remember the causes that failed, the alternatives that were closed off. For example, Martin Luther King, now celebrated sentimentally, actu-

ally called for a radical redistribution of income in America. In the sixties it was possible to speak, even in the mainstream media, of topics like structural poverty and institutional racism. My students won't have to share my opinions, but they will need to hear what people said on those topics, not because it was fashionable to do so but because people were passionately committed to them.

This is not, then, a course in nostalgia. The sixties have been sentimentalized partly, I think, as a substitute gratification for a generation that has not been allowed its bohemia in the actual world. I would like my students to see the period in terms of the present, as a permanent source of reflection and learning. And I feel that I should be cheating them if I did not remind them of the "other" sixties—the years not of love beads and Be-ins but burning towns and poisoned forests.

Paul Sawyer

FACULTY NOTES

Mike Abrams' latest book, *Doing Things with Texts,* (Norton) brings together his major critical essays from 1955 to 1989. **Archie Ammons** has recently been elected to the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters. *The Really Short Poems of A.R. Ammons* (Norton) marks the appearance of Archie's 20th volume of verse. **Rick Bogel's** latest book is *The Dream of My Brother: An Essay on Johnson's Authority* (Virginia). **Cynthia Chase** has been appointed fellow of the University of California Humanities Research Institute for spring '92. **Jonathan Culler's** recent work focuses on Baudelaire. His books continue to be translated into the few languages in which they haven't appeared before: most recently into Chinese, Czech, Finnish, Japanese, Serbian, Slovenian, and Turkish. **Scott Elledge** has edited a volume of verse: *Wider than the Sky: Poems to Grow Up With* (Harper). His Norton Critical text of *Paradise Lost i*s going into its second edition; his *Tess of the d'Urbervilles* has just gone into its third. **Lydia Fakundiny's** *The Art of the Essay* (Houghton) charts the course of the essay from Francis Bacon (b.1561) to Ken McClane (b.1951). As a penance for her year's absence as visiting professor at Chicago, **Debby Fried** has assumed the directorship of Undergraduate Studies (340 majors, 149 graduating seniors). **Roger Gilbert's** *Walks in the World: Experience and Representation in Modern American Poetry* has just been published by Princeton. **Katy Gottschalk** is co-editor with Rick Bogel of the pilot study on *Teaching Prose* (Norton). *The Lies Boys Tell* (Norton) got **Lamar Herrin** the much coveted AWP award for the best novel of 1990. His story "Monuments" ran in *The New Yorker* last October.

Tom Hill is the recipient of a major 3-year NEH grant to investigate the sources of Anglo-Saxon culture. **Molly Hite** is the author of *The Other Side of the Story: Structures and Strategies of Contemporary Feminist Narrative* (Cornell). **Mary Jacobus** will deliver the prestigious Alexander Lectures (Toronto) this fall and, in '92, embark on her term as fellow at the Stanford Center for Research in the Behavioral Sciences. **Phyllis Janowitz's** most recent poems have been aired or are about to be aired in *Ohio Review*, *Radcliffe Quarterly*, and *Southwest Review*. **Carol Kaske** (with John R. Clark) has furnished the first fully edited translation of Ficino's *Three Books on Life* (Binghamton). **Michael Koch**, a former Stegner Fellow, suceeds Cecil Giscombe as editor of *Epoch*. **Alison Lurie's** latest book is *Don't Tell the Grownups: Subversive Children's Literature* (Little Brown). In '89 she received the *Prix Femina Etranger* for her last novel, *The Truth About Lorin Jones*—which may now be enjoyed in Danish, Spanish, and Swedish.

Macmillan is about to release **Phil Marcus's** *Yeats and Artistic Power*. Phil's variorum text of Yeats's stories, **The Secret Rose**, is going into its second edition. **Dan McCall** has recently published a critical study, *The Silence of Bartleby* (Cornell) and his 6th novel, *Triphammer* (Atlantic Monthly Press). Then all those movies. *Jack the Bear*—translated into twelve languages since it appeared in '74—is due for release by 20th Century-Fox this winter, and MGM has just put its money on *Triphammer*. **Ken McClane** has recently published *Walls: Essays 1985-1990* (Wayne State). *The Hudson Review* is running **Jim McConkey's** long essay "Stories from My Life with the Other Animals"—the title story of the forthcoming 3rd volume of Jim's *Court of Memory*. **Scott McMillin** has written a study of *Shakespeare in Performance: Modern Stagings of Henry IV* (Manchester). **Dorothy Mermin's** *Women of Letters in Victorian England 1830 to 1880* has been commissioned by Indiana. **Satya Mohanty** is the author of *Literary Theory and the Claims of History* (Basil Blackwell). **Bob Morgan's** *New and Selected Poems* (Wesleyan) *and* a new volume of stories and novellas, *Watershed* (Peachtree), both impend, along with stories and poems in *The Atlantic*, *Southern Review*, and *Shenandoah*. Since '88 Bob has been both a Guggenheim Fellow and a Fellow at the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Conference Center and in spring '90 Emory hosted a conference on his work. **Harryette Mullen** has published a book of prose poems, *Trimmings*. **Tim Murray** has two texts under contract: *Subliminal Libraries* (Routledge) and—as editor—*The Stakes of Theatre in Contemporary French Thought* (Michigan).

The Cornell Wordsworth, with **Steve Parrish** as General Editor, has published a volume a year since '75; vol. 16 is in press and five more are in the pipeline. (More than half of the total 21 volumes have been or are being edited by Cornell Ph.D.'s). **Joel Porte's** *In Respect to Egotism: Studies in American Romantic Writing* is being published by Cambridge, and he is collecting his essays under the title *American Texts/ American Topics*. **Dan Schwarz's** latest book is *The Case for Humanistic Poetics* (Macmillan and Pennsylvania); a revised edition of his *Reading Joyce's Ulysses* is about to appear (Macmillan and St. Martins). **Harry Shaw** held an appointment as Visiting Fellow, Clare Hall, Cambridge, in '89-'90. **Cushing Strout's** *Making American Tradition: Visions and Revisions from Ben Franklin to Alice Walker* appeared last spring (Rutgers). **Stephanie Vaughn's** collection of stories was published to much acclaim as *Sweet Talk* (Random House) and in Britain as *Able, Baker, Charlie, Dog* (Heinemann). **Pete Wetherbee** has been named Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities. He has recently published *Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales* in the series "Landmarks of World Literature" (Cambridge).

In the past years we have lost some of our most distinguished colleagues. **Fran Mineka**, a leading Victorianist and chairman of the department for ten years before he assumed the deanship of the Arts College, died on 5 October 1985; **Dave Novarr**, a specialist in 17th-century literature and one of our most widely loved teachers, on 21 January 1987; **Arthur Mizener**, eminent as scholar, critic, and biographer of Scott Fitzgerald and Ford Madox Ford, on 11 February 1988; **Saunders Redding**, the acknowledged dean of African-American studies (and the first endowed professor in the field at an Ivy school) on 2 March 1988; **Bob Kaske**, Cornell's foremost medievalist in the 25 years before his death on 8 August 1989. Our scroll begins and concludes with two names which are inseparably linked with our creative writing program: **Baxter Hathaway** died on 29 March 1984 and **Walt Slatoff** on 16 February 1991. Baxter, already a noted scholar of 16th-century criticism when he swapped a tenured job at Montana for an untenured one here, to all intents "created" creative writing at Cornell and gave it class. On Baxter's retirement, Walt succeeded him as de facto chair of the writing staff and presiding spirit of the quarterly journal *Epoch*.

Epoch was founded by Baxter in '47 and has outlived literally by decades every "little" magazine of comparable stature. In its 44 years, *Epoch* has introduced dozens of people who now rank among our major writers. Thomas Pynchon, Don DeLillo, Stanley Elkin, B.H. Friedman, Ronald Sukenik all first broke into print in *Epoch*; Ray Bradbury, Richard Hugo, Joyce Carol Oates, Cynthia Ozick, Philip Roth published some of their very earliest works in its pages; at one time or another its editorial board included Archie Ammons, Morris Bishop, William Dickey, Richard Farina, Geoffrey Hartman, Alison Lurie, and Joanna Russ; and *Epoch* has been peculiarly friendly to our local constituents from the undergraduate Edgar Rosenberg in 1948 to the professorial Harryette Mullen in 1990. To help defray the increasingly daunting publication costs and to support the day-by-day operations of *Epoch* an endowment has been set up in Walt's name. We think that it's a fine way to honor his memory and to keep alive our most durable testimony to creative writing at Cornell; and we hope that you'll jot down the pertinent facts: The Walter Slatoff Memorial Fund/Department of English/250 Goldwin Smith Hall/Cornell University/Ithaca, NY 14853 (607-255-6801/607-255-3385).

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