ENGLISH

AT CORNELL

A NEWSLETTER FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

FALL 1999 VOL. 3

IN THIS ISSUE

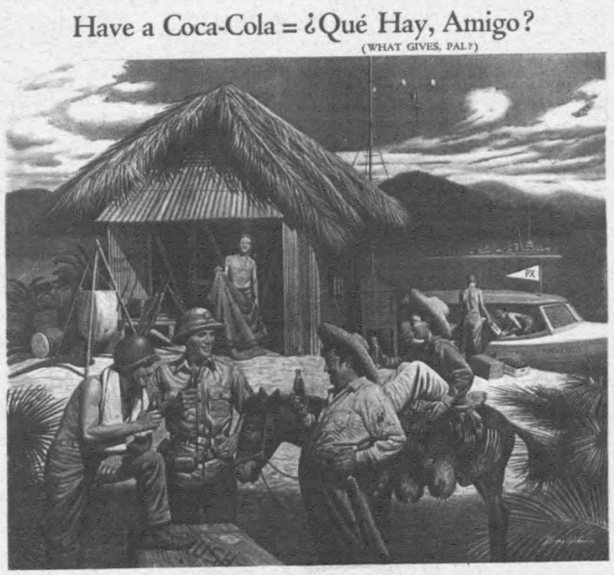
No academic topic has preoccupied the popular press more than the fear that the literary canon—the list of great authors and great works that make up the traditional object of study of literature departments—has suffered neglect by departments pursuing different objects and newer approaches. In recent years, Cornell English faculty members have written about Shakespeare, Spenser, Austen, James, Yeats, *Piers Plowman*, and the Renaissance theory of allegory. They have also written on serial killers, women's bodybuilding movies, video art, the tattooed or painted bodies of Chicano prisoners, gay cinema, Frank Sinatra, and representations of the holocaust—subjects that might be thought of as belonging to the new field of cultural studies.

This issue of *English at Cornell* explores challenges to traditional literary studies in a pair of articles. The first describes some of the department's work in cultural studies, a method of reading cultural forms as parts of an interrelated political and historical whole. The second describes the legacy of Matthew Arnold, the originator of most modern ideas of a literary canon, in relation to the practical problems of putting together a modern anthology of Victorian authors. In a third article, the newsletter surveys the astonishing spate of books by recent graduates of the Cornell M.F.A. program—some of which will no doubt contribute to the evolving canon of English literature.

Of Classics and Commercials: Cultural Studies at Cornell

PAUL SAWYER

In her description of English 209, "Introduction to Cultural Studies," Barbara Correll writes: "Ads, advice columns, tv talkshows, music videos, films, and more bombard our thoughts and senses with their encoded messages. . . . Debates and struggles surround and inform the study of culture: questions about gender and sexuality, race and class, power and value. This course will introduce students to the kinds of cultural forms we encounter in our everyday lives and to some of the conceptual and critical work that has been written about them." The readings for the course, however,



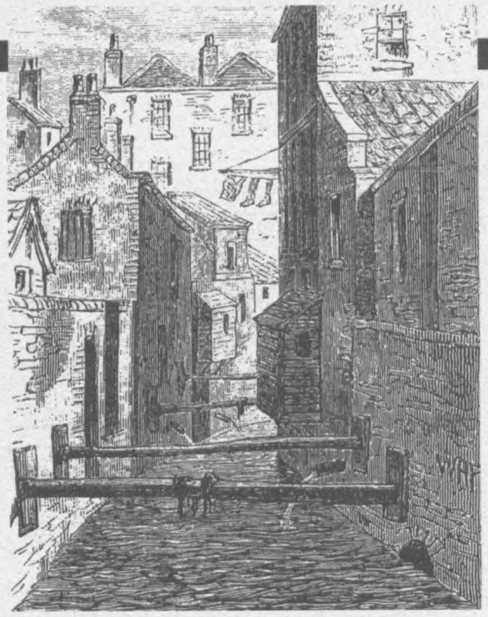
include not just everyday forms of popular culture but "high" cultural works from other periods as well; Shakespeare emerges alive and well at the end of the syllabus, which puts *Coriolanus* next to *The Manchurian Candidate*, a film that is structured in ways interestingly similar to Shakespeare's play. By juxtaposing Shakespeare with ads and movies, Correll temporarily leaves aside questions of literary value in order to consider her texts as cultural products which, whatever their differences, can be read as parts of a total cultural system. The implications of an approach like this for traditional literary studies are obviously profound. In the first place, it implies (as Correll's description suggests) that all cultural products can be understood by techniques of reading that resemble those developed for the great works of literature. It could be argued that this form of cultural literacy constitutes a survival skill for a media age—a training as important as the older kind of "cultural literacy," or reading knowledge of traditional masterworks. But at the same time—and this is the second implication of the new approach—works of literature can be understood more clearly than before when read in relation to a cultural whole—as embedded in the culture and systems of power at work in the time they are written.

This approach is undeniably political. Instead of injecting a political meaning into a text, however, cultural studies attempts to understand the political relations already operating in the culture, though in a buried or "encoded" form. The most general political aim of Barbara Correll's course is to understand, through specific close readings, the way culture produces "subjects"—our identities as women or straights or people of color or members of the middle class and so forth. This means that the material of the course becomes personal for the students, who come to understand not just the texts they read but themselves as readers, thereby gaining critical insight into their own identities and subject positions.

The terms of cultural studies are often technical and the concepts abstruse. Correll's method in the course is to approach the difficult material by building on skills students are already likely to have—which is one reason for teaching advertisements. Before discussing ads, she introduces Stuart Hall's influential distinction between the communicative paradigm of reading and the semiotic paradigm. The communicative paradigm assumes that messages are simply "transmitted" by intentional subjects to an audience that passively receives them; the second assumes that messages are "encoded" by signs that have multiple meanings that interrupt the even flow of communication.

Top photo: Barbara Correll and students

CORNELL UNIVERSITY



The Fleet Ditch, London, as it appeared in the eighteenth century

An example is the 1944 ad for Coca Cola on page 1, which shows American soldiers at an outpost in Panama enjoying a Coke break with the "natives." Most students will immediately notice the chief strategy of the ad: to create an association between Coke and friendliness. (The copy reads: *Have a "Coke,"* says the American soldier, and the natives know he is saying *We are friends . . .* the high-sign of kindly-minded people the world over.) So much would be clear using the communicative paradigm of reading. A semiotic reading of the ad, however, would also notice that despite the surface joviality shared by Americans and Panamanians, the two groups are not alike—one group has the guns and the supplies, while the other (a man with protruding pouch and a grinning youngster on a burro) have the simplicity usually connoted by the now-obsolete and demeaning word "natives." That inequality points to another set of references that the ad partly exposes and partly suppresses—the actual history of Panama's founding. (In order to secure the isthmus for the building of a canal, America sponsored a violent rebellion by which people of the isthmus separated themselves from Colombia). The Canal is in turn a part of a global system of markets and power which was not developed out of mere "friendliness" but which finds its logo, as it were, in the drink sold the world over—Coca-Cola as "the global high-sign." According to the semiotic paradigm, therefore, the words and images of the ad can be read as polysemous—having multiple meanings and references.

A different example of decoding is the exam question, reproduced below right, which asks students to decode the relations of power in a passage from Erasmus' *Colloquies*, a Renaissance book of marital advice for women. In this passage, one woman instructs another on how to manipulate her husband: he can only by "held" by the wife's "mark[ing] the good in him." That is to say, by using strategic wiles, the wife manages to stage a more harmonious form of her own subservience. The text is written, of course, by a male writer ventriloquizing the wisdom of an older, wiser female friend. By talking in this way about the relations of power between men and women in the Renaissance, Correll raises the same question in readings of notably similar contemporary examples—the "Playboy Advisor," or the Sally Jessie Raphael show. Other topics in the syllabus are the "culture industry," hegemony, the function of money in bourgeois society, and the semiotic sociology of Roland Barthes.

The methods of reading that Correll teaches in her introductory course also inform much longer, more complex arguments. Two examples are book-length projects by two other members of the Cornell English department, Laura Brown and Jacqueline Goldsby.

Brown's book *Fables of Modernity: The New World of Eighteenth Century Literary Culture* (under contract with Cornell University Press) reads literary and cultural materials against each other in order to describe what she calls in her introduction "cultural fables"—"composite stories that shape, reflect, and reflect upon the contemporary experience of historical change." The book's six chapters pair six "composite stories" with the aspects of experience they reflect: sewers, oceans and torrents, credit, capital, and the experience of racial contact, which divides itself between two contradictory images—the native prince and the humanoid beast. Together, these fables provide a broad account of the culture of "modernity," which in this case means the historical processes associated with urbanization, capitalization, and the development of the nation-state.

What is a cultural fable? Brown's first chapter, which is about urban sanitation, features a reading of Swift's poem "A Description of a City Shower." In his graphic satire, Swift compares the first drops of a London shower to the sprinkling of a dirty mop by a housewife, then moves through a series of mock-heroic images to a grand climax in which the sewers overflow, carrying detritus from all corners of the city in one great cataract:

Sweepings from Butchers Stalls,
Dung, Guts, and Blood,

Drown'd Puppies, stinking Sprats,
all drench'd in Mud,

Dead cats and Turnip-Tops come
tumbling down the Flood.

In Swift's time, Londoners dumped refuse into a trough in the middle of streets, which on rainy days washed into various open conduits that communicated with urban rivers (like Fleet Ditch in the illustration above), which in turn deposited refuse along the shores of the Thames. (At that time, the words "shower," "shore," and "sewer" were pronounced the same way—something like the modern "sure"—which gives a possible triple meaning to Swift's title.) Brown then gathers together a series of contemporary poems by Swift, Pope, Rochester, and others that use the image of "shower" or "sewer" to describe sometimes the city, sometimes the bodies of prostitutes, and sometimes both. This pattern, Brown argues, reveals two features of the figure of the sewer: first, that it is invariably feminized (as, subtly, in Swift's poem, which remarks on "that Sprinkling which some careless Quean [housewife]/Flirts on you from her Mop"); and second, that it always consists of heterogeneous elements thrown promiscuously (in the older meaning of the word) together—an effect that Brown calls "leveling." In Swift's satire people of different persuasions and social classes seek shelter together from the shower, so that in its structure the poem "superimpos[es] the social mingling of the shower upon the visceral mixing of the sewer" (the drowned puppies, dung, turnips, and so forth). Thus, in all the texts Brown reads, "Both the sewer and the female body, by mingling, mixing, or joining, generate indiscriminacy, level hierarchy, repudiate genealogy, or overturn order." She concludes: "This versatile image represents modern urban experience as a vortex of heterogeneity—fluid, dispersed, and transformative, and structured systematically in terms of the female body."

Perhaps the most striking claim in *Fables of Modernity* is that in the eighteenth century, the experience of modernity is structured around figures of "marginality, difference, or subordination"—specifically, the woman and the non-European. Once again, Swift will do as an example. The "shower/sewer"

English 209: Introduction to Cultural Studies
Exam #1 October 8, 1998 A Take-Home
This exam is due Friday, Oct. 9, or Thursday, Oct. 15, at 10.00 a.m.

Part A. (20 points) Provide brief definitions and an illustrative example for the following:

1. polysemy (adj. = polysemous)
2. hegemony
3. micropolitical
4. naturalized sign
5. cultural pessimism
6. culture
7. interpellated subject

Part B. (40 + 40 points) Essays: Write essay responses to two of the following. Your essays will be evaluated for their ability to use specific examples and to make concrete references to the assigned reading.

1. Note the way that power is *encoded* in the following:
"But you've those very arts in yourself if only you're willing to make use of them. He's yours whether you like it or not; that's settled. The better you make him, the better off you'll be. You have eyes only for his failings. These intensify your disgust, and with this handle you're simply catching him where he can't be held. Mark the good in him, rather, and by this means take him where he *can* be held."
Discuss how you, as a student of cultural studies, would critically decode this classical text of conduct, comparing, in your remarks, its encoding of power with that of at least one contemporary example. You should also be able to refer to critical essays from the assigned reading in composing your essay.

2. From the three texts handed out in class today, select one and discuss it, applying what you have learned from semiotic reading and, especially, from Althusser's "Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses."

3. Think about the events of your own life from the past seven days. Identify and discuss two RSAs and two ISAs with which you, as an interpellated subject, have come in contact.

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Editor: Paul Sawyer, professor of English

Copy editor: Pat Leary

Layout: Chad Murphy

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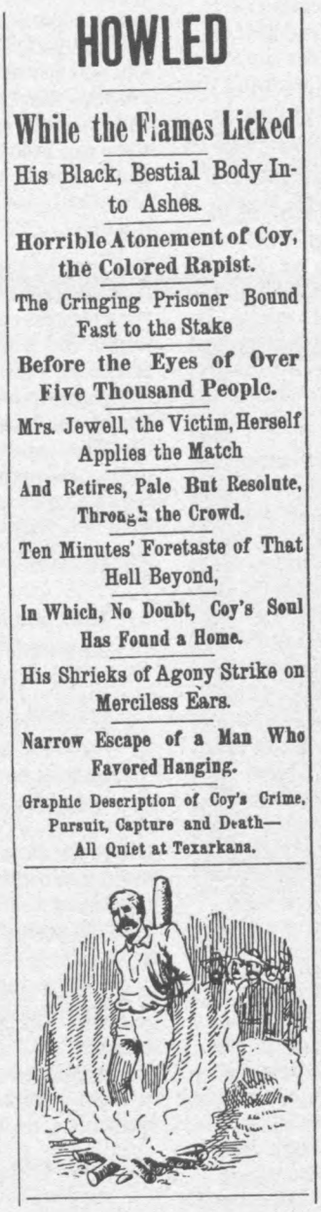
Jackie Goldsby

of his poem—"fluid, dispersed, and transformative"—seems to be a figure of energy as well as of sordid mixing, both admirable and disgusting. This contradiction characterizes both the female body as Swift represents it and the energies of "modernity" itself. In other words, the woman, like the figure of the "native" in the book's later chapters, "shapes a series of cultural fables in which the contradictions of an expansionist capitalist economy can be represented." The function of Brown's fables of modernity, therefore, is to contain contradictions, which means that the fables are ideological forms. Ultimately, the power of Brown's work, and the power of cultural studies as she uses it, comes from her ability to combine a close reading of texts with a close reading of ideology.

Laura Brown looks at a wide variety of materials in order to understand how writers could turn objects like sewers into fables of modern experience. Jacqueline Goldsby looks at a wide variety of materials—photos, newspapers, archival documents, and finally three novels—in order to understand the cultural meaning of one of the grimmest features of the American past: the practice of lynching. Her dissertation, *After Great Pain: The Cultural Logic of Lynching and the Problem of Realist Representation in America, 1882–1922,* covers the period when lynching—extralegal executions, usually of African Americans by white mobs—was at its peak. Lynching was not only prevalent and accepted in certain parts of America, it was also recorded and publicized—often in gruesome detail. For example, in 1893 a black man in Seattle noticed a group of people gathered around what seemed to be a "kind of entertainment." They turned out to be looking at a series of photographs of a torture-lynching in Texas while listening to the gramophone recording of the victim's shrieks and moans. The sadistic report in the Cincinnati *Enquirer* of another lynching of 1893 (see above) is another indication that the taste for such events was not limited to the South but could actually be inflamed by the establishment press. So ferocious and sadistic were many of the lynchings that contemporary observers found themselves at a loss to explain what was, for them, an historically unprecedented phenomenon.



HOWLED

While the Flames Licked

His Black, Bestial Body Into Ashes.

Horrible Atonement of Coy, the Colored Rapist.

The Cringing Prisoner Bound Fast to the Stake

Before the Eyes of Over Five Thousand People.

Mrs. Jewell, the Victim, Herself Applies the Match

And Retires, Pale But Resolute, Through the Crowd.

Ten Minutes' Foretaste of That Hell Beyond,

In Which, No Doubt, Coy's Soul Has Found a Home.

His Shrieks of Agony Strike on Merciless Ears.

Narrow Escape of a Man Who Favored Hanging.

Graphic Description of Coy's Crime, Pursuit, Capture and Death—All Quiet at Texarkana.

What does account for them? Goldsby's dissertation goes beyond the usual kinds of explanations, which concern social and economic causes, to understand what she calls the "cultural logic" of lynching—the ways lynching was given meaning through representation, the ways it was made to "fit in" or make sense within the larger cultural and social system of which it was a part. Americans at the end of the nineteenth century were assaulted by a variety of sudden and disorienting social changes. Goldsby argues that "the 'intense experience' of lynching's violence provided the definition for and drew distinct boundaries around these crises so as to institute an order of reality that gave them substance and form." But techniques of representation did not simply give meaning to lynching by publicizing it in the lurid way described above; they also worked subtly to make lynching acceptable to the society at large, a process Goldsby describes as a "dynamic of recognition and disavowal": "For the nation to see and not fully look at, to know and not actively acknowledge, to record and deliberately not remember the mortal harm being done to African Americans accounts for lynching's staying power at the end of the nineteenth century."

The bulk of Goldsby's research explores the second halves of these oppositions—the disavowal, the failure to acknowledge or remember—by reading three works of realist fiction, including Crane's novella "The Monster" (1897). In this tale, set in a Northern small town, an African American employee of the town judge saves the judge's child in a fire, only to fall victim to a "monstrous" accident: as he is fighting the flames, a container of acid spills on his face and destroys his features. The rest of the novella details the moral struggle of the judge to care adequately for the defaced man despite the opposition of the townsfolk, who want the "monster" removed from their midst despite his heroic action. The final temptation comes in the form of an offer by the town merchants to "buy off" the judge by sending the monster away to a remote retreat—using the resources of a new capitalist order to break the social contract that used to bind people together in a community.

What makes this a tale about lynching—or, as Goldsby argues, a tale about the relationship between capitalism and the representation of lynching? Archival research reveals that in the town where Crane spent much of his youth, a lynching had occurred in 1892 in the town square, across from the courthouse where Crane's older brother was a judge. The townspeople, after a period of contrition, thereafter attempted to erase the memory of the lynching, a fact Crane discusses in manuscript letters to his brother. Goldsby takes this and other factual evidence, including Crane's own economic status as "peon" to a wealthy publisher, to produce a multilayered interpretation—one too complex to be summarized here, but which centers on the figure of the black man, twice "erased" (by disfigurement and by physical removal), who represents both Crane's home town's forgetting of a mob murder and Crane's own dilemma as a writer of realist fiction. A story focusing on lynching would not have earned him the money he so desperately needed to end his publisher's contractual power over him; a story focusing on the moral dilemmas of a white man who has to provide for a disfigured black man, did. In a double act of avowal and disavowal, therefore, Crane allegorizes not only his own "effacement" of the lynching in the story he writes but the wider effacement of historical events that, in Goldsby's view, characterized American realism in general. Because of the very conditions of writing for a new mass market, and because of its problematic relation to history itself, realist fiction withdrew from the full horrors of lynching, "sanctioning the public's disavowal of the violence as a real thing to be conscious about."

For Goldsby, cultural studies provides a way of understanding American culture at the turn of the century as a system of representations—a system that included lynching. She reads representations of lynching to understand not so much the socioeconomic system that caused it as the culture that gave it meaning and helped perpetuate it. And she reads the text of a canonical author as part of the same cultural system, opening up multiple meanings not otherwise apparent. Summing up her work with Crane, she says, "We know the story of white antipathy, but not the story of white apathy—that's what Crane let me explore. His life and writing career exemplified the apathy the reformers tried to attack; he named a problem and included his complicity in it."

Whether the subject is as seemingly trivial as a Coke ad, as mundane as a sewer, or as horrific as a public execution, cultural studies can challenge the mind in the same way as the study of the greatest authors can, while raising the oldest of all questions in literary studies: the question of value. As Goldsby puts it: "It's not just about reading TV shows; the cultural studies approach invites us to question their production and their value. It's about how we as a society define what's valuable in art."

Matthew Arnold and the Making of Canons

DOROTHY MERMIN

Matthew Arnold

When I began teaching at Cornell in 1964 I worried about many things—what opportunities the English department would provide for a woman, whether I could combine family and career, how to become a publishing scholar, and so on—but I was confident that, with my old-fashioned Harvard training, I was at least minimally familiar not only with my field of specialization, Victorian literature, but with just about every literary text in English that I could ever be expected to teach. In my first few years I was assigned, and happily taught, not only the two-semester survey of English literature from Chaucer through T. S. Eliot, but also Comp. Lit. 201–202, beginning with Homer and Greek tragedy and ending somewhere around *Madame Bovary*.

But things changed. First came feminist criticism, calling attention to forgotten women writers. Then Victorianists began to remember that in the nineteenth century, Britain ruled a vast colonial empire, which had inflected English literature in many fascinating ways. More recently still, the feminist interest in gender politics has been extended by "queer theory"; it was during the Victorian period that "the homosexual" became visible to the criminal law and to readers and writers. All these new interests have brought to the forefront of our attention new writers and new texts. The canon of Victorian literature has become uncomfortably crowded, and many once-familiar names are dropping fast into oblivion. I'm currently addressing this issue in two projects: a book on Matthew Arnold and the idea of the canon, and an anthology of Victorian poetry and nonfictional prose.

Works become and remain "canonical"—texts hallowed by tradition that everyone with a literary education should ideally be expected to know—very largely because they are taught in schools and colleges. In practical terms, a literary canon is a curriculum, or more precisely, a set of syllabi. In the course of the nineteenth century a shift took place in elite education from a literary curriculum composed entirely of texts in Greek and Latin to one that included literature in English; the study of English literature became central to humanistic education, and English teachers took on a special cultural and moral authority in schools and universities all over the anglophone world.

The central figure in this development is Matthew Arnold, who made the most memorable and effective claims for the primacy of literary culture. His attitude was formed by his father, Thomas Arnold, a distinguished classical historian and the reforming headmaster of Rugby School, who was made famous by the most influential school story ever written in English, *Tom Brown's Schooldays*. At Rugby as at the other elite schools (Eton, Harrow, etc.), boys studied classical languages and literature and very little else. The study of languages, Thomas Arnold declared, "seems to me as if it was given for the very purpose of forming the human mind in youth," and Greek and Latin by similar divine dispensation were the most "perfect" of languages. He was convinced, furthermore, not only that all essential human wisdom outside of the Christian religion was found at its best in the Greek and Latin writers, but that nothing better was likely ever to be written; modern history, he said, "appears to bear the marks of the fullness of time, as if there would be no future history beyond it."

The intensive, impractical concentration on classical studies was for the upper classes only, since no else could afford the time or money, and only for boys. There were no comparable schools for girls, to whom the universities also were closed. Thomas Arnold felt very strongly "the extreme difficulty of giving to girls what really deserves the name of education intellectually." His eldest daughter wanted to drink like her brothers at the fountain of wisdom, but he was too busy to teach her more than the rudiments of Latin (he had allowed her to join her brothers when he gave them their first lessons), so she had to settle for reading French and German by herself. Classical education separated boys from girls, the privileged classes from everyone else. English literature was not taught at all in elite schools or the universities.

Matthew Arnold was one of the finest products of his father's pedagogy and became a distinguished poet and critic. He earned his living, however, at the opposite end of the educational scale, as an inspector of state-supported elementary schools for the lower classes, girls as well as boys. In these schools, instruction had to be practical in purpose and sharply limited in scope, and of course it had to be in English. Not only did most of the children attend school only for a few years; as the century progressed, science and other practical subjects preempted much of the small curricular space available. Arnold firmly believed in the importance of literary study for these children: more than anything else the schools could teach, he believed, it would "civilize" and "humanize" them. But what should they read? It had to be of the best possible quality, since it might be all the literature they would ever encounter, and it had to be available in very small units, since it was allotted so little time. Writers whose works were too long or too difficult were out of the question; he saw little point in studying isolated passages, which was all there was room for, from Shakespeare's plays.

Prose fiction was even more impossible—the novel was just beginning to attain high literary status, and in any case novels would have been too long for young children, and too expensive to provide. So, inevitably, children were taught short poems by modern writers, including even some by women. Poetry had the advantage, too, of being separated from ordinary speech, rather like Greek and Latin: even now many Cornell students—English majors included—find poetry "difficult" and feel that they need to be taught special skills before they can read it. As John Guillory, one of the foremost analysts of literary canons, has remarked, poetry is the Latin of the vernacular.

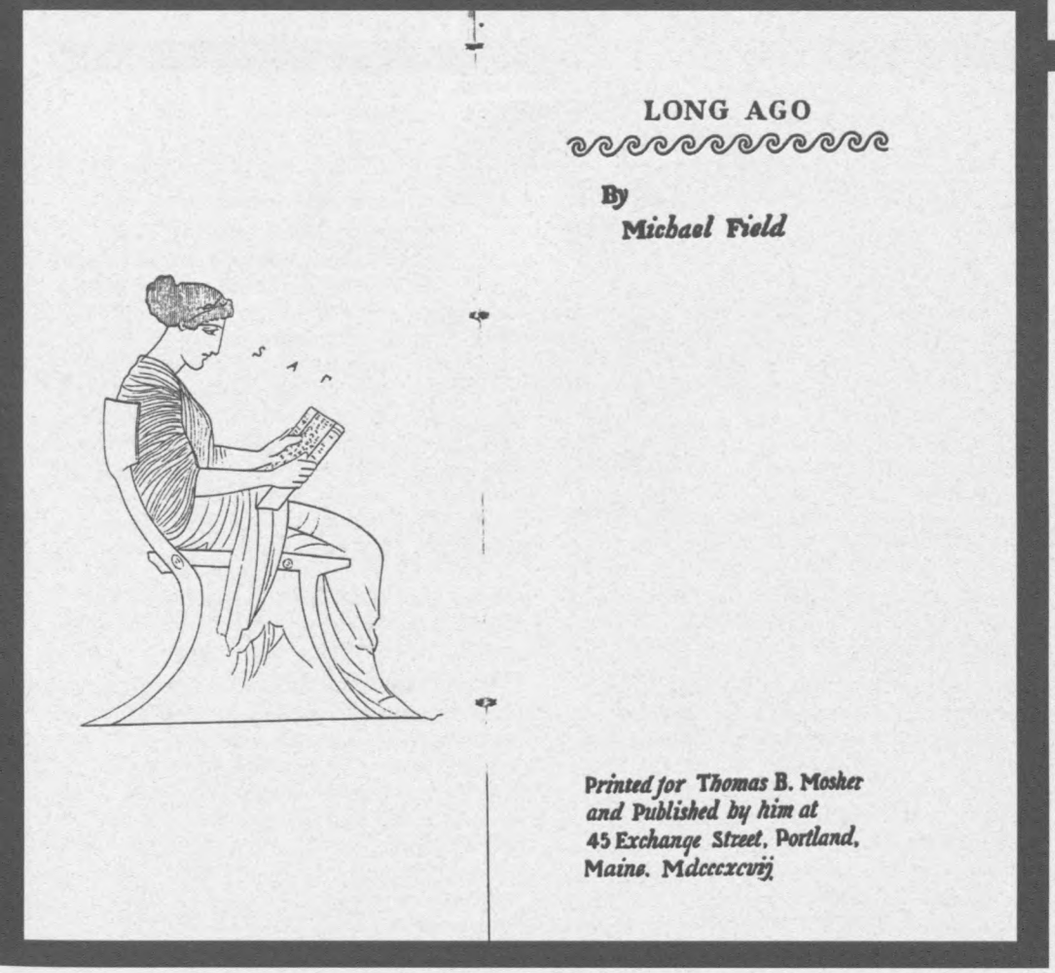
The idea of the literary canon in English (or in translation into English) grows both from the classical canon and from the Bible, to which the word "canon" more properly refers. It is a large but strictly limited set of the greatest works of literature, parallel to the officially accepted books that make up the Bible, and its prestige rose as the influence of the Bible waned. In 1880 in a famous essay entitled "The Study of Poetry," Matthew Arnold asserted that as people come to disbelieve in the literal truth of the Bible,

> *More and more mankind will discover that we have to turn to poetry to interpret life for us, to console us, to sustain us. Without poetry, our science will appear incomplete; and most of what now passes with us for religion and philosophy will be replaced by poetry.*

Therefore, he continues, "we must set our standard for poetry high, since poetry, to be capable of fulfilling such high destinies, must be poetry of a high order of excellence."

In his most optimistic moments Arnold believed that poetry could do its work unaided, by force of its own quasi-magical power; but practical experience taught him otherwise. In his school report for 1878 he wrote:

> *good poetry is formative: it has, too, the precious power of acting by itself and in a way managed by nature, not through the instrumentality of that somewhat terrible character, the scientific educator. I believe that even the rhythm and diction of good poetry are capable of exercising some formative effect, even though the sense be imperfectly understood.*



Above, frontispiece for a volume of poetry by Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who wrote collaboratively as "Michael Field." *Right,* Amy Levy wrote three novels and three volumes of poetry before her death at age twenty-seven. These poets will appear in Dorothy Mermin's forthcoming anthology. Levy photo is reprinted from *Daughters of the Covenant: Portraits of Six Jewish Women* by Edward Wagenknecht (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1983), copyright (c) 1983 by Edward Wagenknecht.

He liked to think this was true because the teachers who taught the great mass of children were themselves by Arnoldian standards very ill-taught: mostly they were the products of the same minimal system in which they served, having been chosen to stay on as pupil-teachers and then given some additional training. Still, in practice an educator, "scientific" or otherwise, is necessary, as he immediately acknowledges: "But of course the good of poetry is not really got unless the sense of the words is known." He knew that to do its work effectively, poetry needs teachers and trainers of teachers, critics, editors, and anthologists.

Victorian literature right now has plenty of teachers and critics, but a paucity of texts for the classroom that adequately reflect our distrust of the Arnoldian notion of canonicity and our widening sense of what kinds of works and authors constitute "Victorian literature." As Matthew Arnold was all too well aware, students can only read what can be provided for them without undue expense. This practical fact encouraged him to believe that small quantities of great poetry—sometimes just two or three lines—would convey poetry's magical powers all by themselves. (He called such lines "touchstones," quasi-scientific instruments for detecting the presence or absence of true poetic metal.) This fact also forces a considerable degree of conservatism on restless teachers, especially of poetry written before this century. It's hard to go beyond the canon in the classroom if texts are not available; and while the advent of inexpensive paperbacks has provided us with novels and modern works in an abundance Arnold could never have dreamt of, for Victorian poetry finding texts to teach from has become a serious problem. There is no satisfactory edition, for instance, of the poetry of either Elizabeth Barrett Browning or Christina Rossetti, the two most important nineteenth-century women poets. More and more I've had to photocopy, cut and paste, and photocopy again to provide materials for my classes.

I therefore accepted with some enthusiasm the request from a publisher of textbooks to coedit a new college-level anthology of Victorian literature. Like my collaborator, Professor Herbert Tucker of the University of Virginia, I was seduced by the prospect of redefining the Victorian canon. I have since spent many happy hours reconsidering old favorites and reading through the works of previously unanthologized authors. But now we must face up to the crucial condition of canon-formation: limitations of time and space. In an anthology as in a syllabus, for everything new that goes in something must come out. At 1,400 double-column pages, our anthology will be an unpleasantly large physical object—too large to be carried comfortably to class or outdoors to read under a tree—but it still won't begin to accommodate everything we want. The publisher asked us to start by preparing a "wish list" table of contents, not worrying about length; this list went to ten reviewers at different colleges and universities, who were asked to check off the works they would want to have included and mark those they thought should be left out. It turned out that they wanted to keep almost everything; several of them explained, furthermore, that works they hadn't checked were simply ones they hadn't read, not ones they didn't want. So this exercise, while interesting, was not much help.

How does one select? We want to choose the "best," in some residually Arnoldian sense of the term, and also the "most representative" and "most interesting." But of course these criteria beg the question. "Representative" of what?—"Interesting" to whom, and on what grounds? We are trying to hold firm on standards of stylistic "merit," ruthlessly rejecting anything that seems to us badly written or (what is often the same thing) trite or confused. Still, it can be compellingly argued that our criteria of stylistic merit are distorted by modernist distrust of strong affect (thus excluding a lot of work by women) and that often we find works trite and thin because we don't recognize their unfamiliar concerns and complexities.

The "best" Tennyson, Browning, Carlyle, John Stuart Mill, and other familiar male authors has been established by long agreement, and only minor tinkering seems necessary to accommodate traditional taste to contemporary interests. But for their female counterparts the process of reaching consensus has hardly begun; the new anthologies of women's poetry that are now rushing into print contain wildly divergent selections. And some of the works we will include are almost entirely unknown to twentieth-century readers; some have not been reprinted at all in this century. I'd like to include Florence Nightingale's anguished feminist outpouring, *Cassandra,* for instance, which pretty much dropped out of sight until feminist critics rediscovered it, and also selections from her vigorously written, fascinatingly detailed, and enormously influential *Notes on Nursing,* which so far as I know has never gotten attention in a literary context before.

In order to fit such things in I find myself, like Arnold, placing a premium on brevity. It will be easy to find space for several terse

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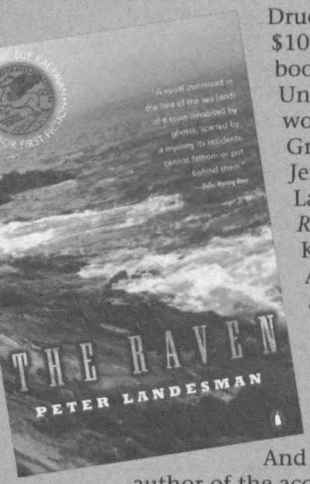
Cornell M.F.A.s: A Full Harvest

The M.F.A. program at Cornell is one of the smallest of the nation's major writing programs, admitting about four poets and four fiction writers a year. Its graduates are also among the most prolific. In the 1990s publishers brought out novels and stories by Lorrie Moore, Junot Diaz, Fiona Cheong, Beth Lordan, Edward Hardy, A. Manette Ansay, Micah Perks, Irvin Morris, Nina Revoir, Julie Hilden, and Peter Landesman and poetry collections by Alice Fulton, Elizabeth Holmes, Nancy Vieira Couto, and Peter Liotta. Of one class alone, the group that finished in 1992, three writers—O'Nan, Ansay, and Landesman—have published fourteen works of fiction among them. Many of these books have won prizes. Between 1991 and 1994, three out of the four winners of the prestigious Drue Heinz Prize, which awards $10,000 and publication to a book of short stories by the University of Pittsburgh, were won by Cornellians (Elizabeth Graver, Stewart O'Nan, and Jennifer Cornell). Peter Landesman's novel *The Raven* won the 1996 Sue Kauffman Prize from the American Academy of Arts and Letters. In 1993 Jody Gladding won the Yale Younger Poets Prize, the most prestigious poetry prize in the nation, for her collection *Stone Crop*. And in July, Junot Diaz, the author of the acclaimed collection *Drown*, appeared on the cover of *Newsweek*. This year, *English at Cornell* recognizes the achievements of the M.F.A. program and its graduates by describing the most recent novels and poetry collections. (Space constraints prevent mention of fiction published before 1998.)

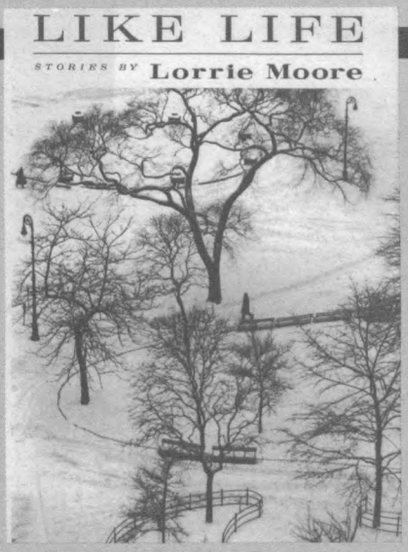


FICTION

Susan Choi, *The Foreign Student* (HarperFlamingo, 1998). A feisty Southern belle meets a Korean student who has "escaped his country's war but not its ravages." The *Los Angeles Times* called it "a first novel of extraordinary sensibility and transforming strangeness."

Paul Cody, *So Far Gone* (Picador, 1998). Cody's third novel enters the consciousness of Jack Connor, who is on death row for the murder of three family members. *Publisher's Weekly* wrote that few writers "have given us as penetrating and compassionate a portrait of both the mind and soul of a murderer as Cody does here."

Beth Lordan, *And Both Shall Row* (Picador, 1998). In the title novella of this collection of stories about the fictional small town of Clayborne, two sisters grow old together and finally face a lifetime of betrayals at the end of one sister's life. *Kirkus* calls the title novella "one of the finest works of its kind since Tillie Olson's classic 'Tell Me a Riddle' . . . a story that just builds and builds to its heartstopping climax."



Lorrie Moore, *Birds of America* (Knopf, 1998), is the fourth story collection by its best-selling author, whose previous books include *Self-Help* and *Like Life*. Julian Barnes said of the latest: "she is thankfully still clever and witty, but her depth of focus has increased, and with it her emotional seriousness" (*New York Review of Books*).

Manette Ansay, *Midnight Champagne* (Morrow, 1999). Ansay's fourth book is a tightly plotted novel about a wedding that takes place during a Lake Michigan snowstorm, attended by a diffuse population of guests, including a husband and the ghost of the wife he has murdered. *Kirkus* writes that "her canvas is as intimate and as ambiguous as family lore itself, and her characters as clearly envisioned."

Melissa Bank, *The Girls' Guide to Hunting and Fishing* (Viking, 1999). These linked stories follow a witty, wise-cracking heroine's trials of romance from age 14 into adulthood, with a final segment that spoofs popular man-hunting guides like *The Rules*. *Kirkus* writes: "Bank has created a delightful heroine who deserves her happy ending even though any reader who has really been paying attention to the sharp, unsentimental details knows that all happy endings are provisional." This first book, a Book-of-the-Month Club alternate, will also appear in serial in *Cosmopolitan*. Bank is currently at work on the screenplay, to be produced by Francis Ford Coppola.

Jason Brown, *Driving the Heart and Other Stories* (Norton, 1999). This first collection "excels at portraying the life struggles of those with ravaged psychic resources—unique people and their alienated offspring at life's dark edges" (*Publisher's Weekly*).

Peter Landesman, *Blood Acre* (Viking, 1999). This novel follows the son of a powerful and corrupt lawyer through a day and a long night of wandering as he finds himself a suspect in the murder of his secretary and lover. Andrea Barrett wrote: "Peter Landesman brings to radiant life a dark, disorienting, and violent vision, rendered in gorgeous prose."

Stewart O'Nan, *A Prayer for the Dying* (Holt, 1999). In O'Nan's fifth novel, a diphtheria epidemic breaks out in the frontier town of Friendship, Wisconsin, and Jacob Hansen—preacher, sheriff, and now mortician—tries to stay true to his duties while at the same time saving his family from the coming plague. The *New York Times* called O'Nan "a young writer of unusual range and variety . . . a master of voices and the place they resonate from."

POETRY

Alice Fulton, *Sensual Math* (Norton, 1995). Fulton's fourth collection contains "My Last TV Campaign," a sequence spoken by an ad executive, and another sequence on Apollo and Daphne that re-imagines the myth in terms of contemporary attitudes to women, rape, and nature. Alice Fulton, the holder of a MacArthur Fellowship, is a poet whose work has been called "a music for the intellect, felt on the tongue and in the body, resonating in the mind" (Edward Falco). Her collected essays, *Feeling as a Foreign Language,* came out this year from Graywolf Press.

Lynn Powell, *Old and New Testaments* (University of Wisconsin Press, 1995). Powell's first volume, which won the Brittingham Prize in Poetry, builds on biblical motifs and the experience of a fundamentalist childhood and climaxes in a sequence from the other end of life, love poems to an aged great-aunt. One of the book's judges called it "a reclaiming of spiritual texts and traditions for a woman's life in the body—a life of childhood physicality, female sexuality, procreation, and nurturing love."

Elizabeth Holmes, *The Patience of the Cloud Photographer* (Carnegie Mellon Press, 1997). In the title poem, the narrator waits three days on an island with a camera until the "high mists" overhead "met fields of pure light, caught/ fire in still after still." This varied collection concerns the illuminations that make ordinary moments extraordinary for the patient watcher—whether the subject is a former cat ("now/you are ash, you/are ash somewhere") or a field of yellow tulips ("Night falling, the shadow-/continents drift on their yellow/sea. Each night the tulips/ hover, snuffed suns").

Crystal Williams, *Kin* (Michigan State University Press, forthcoming in 2000). This collection by a first-year M.F.A. student takes the form of a poetic memoir, composed of poems about family members and others who have influenced her and who give their names to the titles of the poems. In Williams's words, the book "attempts to bridge what Lucille Clifton calls the gap between the intuitive and the intellectual."

NONFICTION

Jen Hill's *An Exhilaration of Wings* (forthcoming from Viking) seeks out and collects the best writing on birds from the past two centuries—words of fine natural observation and surprising literary value.

Faculty Notes

Roger Gilbert has edited, with Jeffrey Robinson and Anne Wallace, *The Walker's Literary Companion* (Breakaway Books).

Ellis Hanson's *Cruising the Screen* (forthcoming from Duke University Press) is a collection of essays on gay cinema.

Mary Jacobus's Clarendon Lectures will be published this year as *Psychoanalysis and the Scene of Reading* (Oxford University Press).

Carol Kaske has just published *Spenser and Biblical Poetics* with Cornell University Press.

Alison Lurie's most recent novel is *The Last Resort* (Chatto & Windus and Henry Holt, 1998).

Dan McCall's *Citizens of Somewhere Else* (Cornell, 1999) is a study of the literary relationship between Hawthorne and Henry James.

This year, **Robert Morgan** will publish *Gap Creek* (Algonquin), a novel; *The Balm of Gilead Tree* (Gnomon), a collection of stories; and a new book of poems, *Topsoil Road* (Louisiana State University Press).

Tim Murray has coedited, with Alan K. Smith, *Repossessions: Psychoanalysis and the Question of Early Modern Culture* (Minnesota, 1998).

Edgar Rosenberg's definitive scholarly edition of *Great Expectations* was published this year as a Norton Critical Edition and has been chosen by the French government as the anglophone baccalauréat text in the public schools.

Dan Schwarz's *Imagining the Holocaust* is forthcoming from St. Martin's Press.

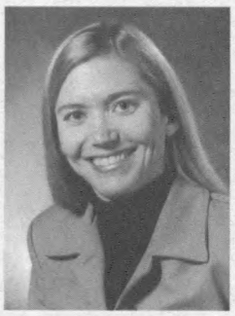
Harry Shaw's *Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot* (Cornell, 1999) is a scholarly meditation on the relations between fictional realism and historical truth.

CHARLES LEVY 1931–1998

Charles S. Levy, Professor of English, died suddenly on November 5, 1998, following heart surgery. He was born in New York City and graduated from Hamilton College as valedictorian of his class. He received his Ph.D. degree from Cornell in 1962, and after teaching at the University of Minnesota for several years, returned to Cornell in 1967 as an assistant professor, specializing in the English Renaissance. He was known as a demanding but highly organized, scrupulously fair, and utterly conscientious teacher. As a scholar he was not only demanding but exacting. For him "close enough" was never good enough: his motto was "let's get it right." A tireless advocate for academic causes in which he believed, he was also, when necessary, a tenacious as well as an eloquent disputant, especially in defense of traditional humanistic values. Charles was a devoted family man. He is survived by his wife of forty-two years, Andree Grandjean Levy, who was instrumental in developing his deep and abiding love of France; and by his two daughters, Marian Wilson and Claudia Manganello.

This spring, Brandon Bigelow, a former student and advisee, published a tribute to Charles in the *Cornell Daily Sun.* That letter reads in part: "Beneath the formal demeanor lay the heart of a man deeply committed to his students. His advice was always thoughtful and well received, and extended far beyond my undergraduate years at Cornell . . . [he] continued to advise me through a correspondence we began as soon as I left Ithaca. He maintained contact with many of his advisees, and all of us benefited from his continued interest and help. Professor Levy believed that his first and highest calling was to share his passion for literature with his students."

Jonathan Bishop retired this June after thirty-eight years in the Department of English. He was educated at Harvard and taught at Amherst College before coming to Cornell in 1961. His groundbreaking study of American transcendentalism, *Emerson on the Soul,* appeared in 1964; his more recent work has been on Biblical theology. For many years he taught courses in American literature and the New Testament. His interest in writing as a form of self-knowledge led him to found and direct the department's most popular freshman seminar, "Writing from Experience"; he was also director of the Freshman Writing Program for four years. A new book, *In Time,* will be published locally by McBooks Press.



Jennifer Ashton, a specialist in the literature of modernism, joined the Cornell English department last fall. She grew up in Salt Lake City, graduated from the University of Utah, and received her Ph.D. degree recently from Johns Hopkins. Her dissertation, *Writing That Counts: The Mathematics of Modernism,* challenges the prevailing view of Gertrude Stein as "the queen of linguistic indeterminacy," arguing instead that Stein's innovative comparison of words to numbers results in a deterministic account of language. A student of modernist poetics, Jennifer is a poet in her own right, whose work has appeared in *Paris Review* and *The New Republic.*

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and passionate lyrics by "Michael Field"—the pen name of two women, Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper, who were aunt and niece, as well as companions and lovers—whose first book of poems, *Long Ago,* built elegantly on fragments of Sappho's verse. But many of the best poems by Victorian women are very long, probably because women invented new kinds of stories and situations and couldn't rely on their readers' instant comprehension, let alone their agreement. Elizabeth Barrett Browning's abolitionist poem about an American slave who murdered the child she bore after a white man raped her needed a lot of space (253 lines of poetry plus 36 stanza numbers and the spaces between stanzas) to make her character's motive understandable. *A Castaway,* a dramatic monologue by Augusta Webster in which a rich prostitute defends her way of life, takes 630 lines to develop the character and the argument. (Webster's poetry was greatly admired in the late nineteenth century, but is almost unknown today.) Amy Levy, the best although not quite the only English Jewish woman poet of any note this century, is fortunately somewhat briefer in Xantippe's melancholy account of what it was like to be married to Socrates, but for the anxious anthologist, not brief enough. These are all excellent poems, and we will include all of them; but I wish they didn't take up so many pages. Barrett Browning's masterpiece, the verse-novel *Aurora Leigh,* is (as critics pointed out when it was first published) longer than *Paradise Lost* and can't possibly be shoehorned in. And then, of course, we are left with the question of what will go out to make room for them.

The writers whose work will be less fully represented than in earlier anthologies—Matthew Arnold himself among them—were for the most part educated in the classical canon, while those who will displace them mostly were not. Most of the new writers are women; a few will be from the lower class. But the audience we envision is not unlike the audience Arnold had in mind when he formulated the idea of a vernacular canon. He assumed that the rich would read Greek, the poor would read short poems by contemporary authors, and the middle class would read the English classics ("classic," he said, really just means "the very best") and other great works in translation. This kind of cultural division among readers has by no means disappeared, although college students in America today are more diverse in almost every respect than the middle class of Arnold's England. And while teachers of literature are much less sure now than Arnold was that defining a canon of the "very best" is either possible or desirable, most of us still can't help believing that literature is, in some very fundamental way, good for our students and good for ourselves. I hope that our readers will find our new selections as "good" in every way as the works they join or displace—and considerably more interesting.

Dorothy Mermin was recently named Goldwin Smith Professor of English. Her most recent book is Godiva's Ride, *a study of Victorian women writers.*

Letter from the Chair

JONATHAN CULLER

Samuel Johnson writes, "There are few things not purely evil of which we can say, without some emotion of uneasiness, this is the last." As my term as chair of the English department draws to a close, I am moved to reflect on Dr. Johnson's remark. It has been an honor to have served as chair of this distinguished department for the past three years—a department which embraces wide differences of view without the petty contentiousness that marks some of our peer institutions. My colleagues work very hard in the many activities other than teaching and scholarship in which a chair must unremittingly enlist them, but the press of problems, duties, and initiatives, large and small, does grow wearisome. I am ready to pass on these responsibilities and if, as Dr. Johnson notes, I harbor some mild sense of regret, I welcome his shrewd interpretation: "We always make a secret comparison between a part and the whole; the termination of any period of life reminds us that life itself has likewise its termination." Fortunately I can say that affairs will be in excellent hands, since Professor Harry Shaw, the consensus choice of his colleagues, has agreed to direct the business of the department for the next three years.

Harry Shaw is a graduate of Harvard University and the University of California at Berkeley, an expert on the history of the novel and author of *The Forms of Historical Fiction and Narrating Reality: Austen, Scott, Eliot,* forthcoming from Cornell University Press this year. Harry has taught at Cornell since 1978 and has previously served as an energetic and successful director of the John S. Knight Writing Program, so he is no stranger to the labors of administration. Many graduates remember fondly his undergraduate and graduate courses on the novel, and in recent years he and medievalist Tom Hill have joined forces to teach a course on Scottish literature, which has become a fixture in the curriculum. Last fall Harry chaired a committee to consider the undergraduate experience in the department—not just requirements for the English majors but the sort of intellectual and personal experience we are offering those who choose to take our courses—and we are now engaged in discussions of some of the ideas put forth in his report.

This has produced a complicated debate about the structure of the English major and of the honors program. At the moment our requirement for majors (in addition to a certain number of credits in English) is two courses in a foreign literature and three courses in literature before 1800. Does this make sense? Is insuring a modicum of study of pre-nineteenth-century literature what we care about most? And if the goal of the foreign literature requirement is to enhance our majors' sensitivity to language and linguistic structure, is this the best way to achieve it? The faculty is divided on both these issues. There is also before us a proposal to introduce "concentrations": to require English majors to take a number of courses focused on a particular genre, period, or type of literature. And we are divided about whether the Honors program should require full historical coverage rather than just a thesis, as now. How will all this turn out? Watch this space for the sequel.

Although we are a department reputedly linked with "theory"—an idea that my presence in the chair's office has done nothing to dispel—our curriculum remains surprisingly traditional in its main outlines. Shakespeare is popular at all levels, from freshman seminars to graduate courses. Our new course, "Shakespeare and the Twentieth Century," is doing well, as is our regular Shakespeare survey. Our largest courses this year are "The Culture of the 1960s," followed by "Mind and Memory" (an interdisciplinary course led by writer Diane Ackerman, with visiting lecturers from across the university), "The Bible" (a surprise, this!), "Readings in English and American Literature, 1200–1800" (for nonmajors), and Shakespeare. (This year even the course on the eighteenth-century novel surprised us by reaching its cap.) Preregistration figures for next fall suggest that our Shakespeare survey may finally outstrip "The Culture of the 1960s." Is this fallout from *Shakespeare in Love*?—Shakespeare as the culture of the nineties?

As I reported last year, the department has increased its efforts to broaden its conversation with our alumni, and we have been very gratified by the results. A group of Friends of the English Department has been of enormous help in enabling us to undertake activities that the regular budget from the college does not finance: encouraging faculty members to invite undergraduate classes out for pizza or informal gatherings, organizing discussions of job prospects for majors, sending faculty to speak to alumni groups, enhancing social events for majors and honors students, and bringing in a Shakespearean actor to lead a workshop on Shakespeare's sonnets and the oral declamation of poetry. We are especially grateful to Helen Metteler for a generous gift in support of the expository writing program, to alumnus Alan Schwartz and Louise Schwartz of the Truman Capote Literary Foundation, which has once again funded the Truman Capote Fellowship in the M.F.A. Program, to Jane Gellman, the mother of a graduating senior, who has made a generous two-year gift to the Friends fund, to Torrey Harder, who is supporting a visit by a director and actors from Shakespeare and Company, and to Richard Reinhold and Beth Grossman, who have hosted an event in New York and contributed once again to a departmental contingency fund. I invite you to send contributions and inquiries to me c/o Friends of the English Department, Goldwin Smith Hall, Cornell, 14853-3201.

This coming year we wish to establish a list of Friends of the English Department who would be willing to chat with current English majors—on the phone or by e-mail—about career prospects in the fields they themselves have entered. We remain convinced that an English major is excellent preparation for gainful employment, but our majors themselves (and their parents) are often skeptical. A dean of Cornell's Johnson Graduate School of Management says that in fact English majors are generally better equipped than economics majors for work at the business school and in the business world, where the ability to analyze, to synthesize and to write may be more important than quantitative skills. Cornell alumnae/i would do us and our students a real service if they were willing to talk with our majors about their own experiences and to give them advice.

May I ask anyone who is willing to do so to contact Harry Shaw, at *english_chair@cornell.edu* or Lisa Harris in the Cornell Career Center, who will arrange to put English majors in touch with alumni: Lisa Harris, University Career Center, 103 Barnes Hall, Ithaca, 14853-1601, tel.: 607 255-6926, e-mail: *lmh23@cornell.edu.*

ENGLISH
AT CORNELL
252 Goldwin Smith Hall
Ithaca, NY 14853-3201