English
AT CORNELL
A NEWSLETTER FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH
FALL 2010 VOL. 13

An interview with Dan Schwarz

by J. Robert Lennon

Dan Schwarz, the Frederic J. Whiton Professor of English and Stephen H. Weiss Presidential Fellow, came to Cornell as an assistant professor in 1968.

JRL: In your more than four decades at Cornell, you have studied every conceivable subject that a scholar in your field might consider, and written about them in every imaginable form: modernist literature and narrative theory and practice, the Holocaust, New York, and American culture. What can you say about your broad range of interests?

DRS: I think my ruling passion is curiosity and the desire to know. I have worked on a range of projects, following my interests, but always motivated by the desire to share what I have learned. In my writing and teaching, I live by two contradictory mantras: "Always the text; Always historicize." I try to balance the two, all the while knowing some texts require more of one or more of the other.

JRL: You have described your critical approach as "humanistic," a term found in the titles of two of your books, *The Humanistic Heritage: Critical Theories of the English Novel from James to Hillis Miller* (1986) and *The Case for a Humanistic Poetics* (1991). Here's a quote from you on this subject: "Our role as humanists is to focus attention on what is special and distinct in the human enterprise . . . as a literature professor my focus is on creativity, and as a cultural historian my focus is on the historical and social contexts in which humans function." Can you talk a bit about your work in the context of this idea?

Dan Schwarz

DRS: I have stressed that books are by humans, about humans, and for humans and that when reading, we respond to a human voice. Recent work in cognitive studies supports my bedrock belief that humans are defined in part by an urge for narratives that give shape and form to their experience.

JRL: Your recent book *In Defense of Reading* is a spirited manifesto celebrating the life of the mind. What initially made you think that reading required defending, and what did you learn while defending it?

DRS: In our visual and digital culture where the emphasis is on gathering information rapidly and communicating in text messages, serious, engaged reading of complex, sophisticated imaginative literature—particularly novels of considerable length—is in jeopardy. *In Defense of Reading* is an argument for why and how we read and why some of us have chosen to be readers and writers.

In the first chapters, I discuss the value of reading: (1) We identify with the narrative voice or we distance ourselves from that voice, be it a first-person speaker or an omniscient narrator; (2) In much the same way, we identify with or distance characters; (3) Reading imaginative literature enhances our life experience by taking us into imagined worlds; (4) Reading imagined work increases our political and moral awareness; (5) Imagined works complement and often deepen our historical knowledge; paradoxically, this may happen even when the facts are not exactly accurate if the text speaks to the warp and woof of lived life at a particular time; (6) Imaginative literature is an important part of the history of ideas and enacts important philosophical visions; (7) We learn about authors' psyches and values and the way they saw the world and why; (8) Imaginative literature increases the pleasures of our travels and vice versa; and (9) Reading not only makes us aware of ethical choices, but also heightens our awareness of the ethical implications of human behavior.

JRL: In an age and culture that benefits from widespread Jewish-American intellectual achievement, it's difficult to conceive of a time when a Jewish professor was a rare thing. But this was the case in 1968, when you arrived at Cornell, a time you discuss at length in *In Defense of Reading*. Can you talk a bit about those early years?

DRS: The faculties of major English departments in the '60s and '70s, especially at the leading private universities, had a dearth of Jews. With few exceptions, the anti-Semitic ravings of Pound, as well as the equally objectionable if less strident version of anti-Semitism in Eliot, were either excused as the eccentricities of men of genius or dismissed as unsuitable matters of discussion. In graduate school, many of us, trained in formalist rubric of organic form, read without noticing, or pretended not to notice, anti-Semitic passages.

Teachers assumed that Jewish students were part of that imaginary audience of ideal readers on which the New Criticism and Aristotelian criticism depended. Furthermore, Jewish students and professors

continued on page 2

immersed ourselves in elaborate and arcane Christian theological debate to understand Milton or Hawthorne, without reflecting that we were part of a different tradition; perhaps some of us took secret satisfaction in learning that Milton knew Hebrew. Perhaps, too, we took pleasure in knowing that the exegetical tradition of literary criticism resembled the conversational and inquisitive mode of Talmudic studies, or what we—as assimilated Jews—imagined Talmudic study to be.

Figures like M. H. Abrams, Harry Levin, Lionel Trilling—those who found a place with the Ivy League—and an outsider like Leslie Fiedler, as well as New York intellectuals who made their mark, such as Irving Howe and Alfred Kazin, became spiritual fathers to those Jews who took up English and American studies in the 1960s.

As something of an outsider to the social milieu of the 1960s, I couldn't pretend to be a Main Line son and grandson of an Episcopal Exeter and Princeton graduate whose family took part in the American Revolution. So I decided to be who I am: outspoken, straightforward, and somewhat of an innocent when it comes to disguising my feelings. I chose my subjects in terms of what interested me, because I knew that was where I would do my best work.

As a Jew in a profession where there were few Jews in the '60s, I probably was attracted to outsiders—such as Conrad, a Pole in the English culture. When deciding on a dissertation subject, I returned to Conrad—the subject of my college honors thesis—and his narrative strategies. I was also attracted to outsiders like Disraeli and Joyce and stressed Jewish themes in my books on those figures.

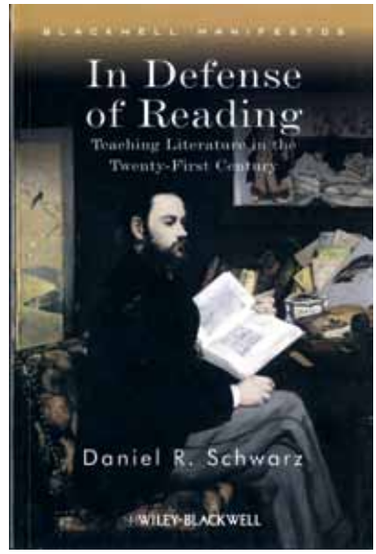
JRL: I was going to mention Conrad—you have probably written more about him than you have about any other writer, including the 2001 book *Rereading Conrad*. What initially fascinated you about this writer, and what keeps you returning to him after all these years?

DRS: Subjects find their authors. Conrad found me as much as I Conrad. His work lives with me every day, and my use of examples no doubt comes from his having been part of my intellectual life for almost 50 years. I have always been fascinated with how Conrad addresses the problem of living in an amoral, indifferent cosmos that he defines as a remorseless process rather than, as most of his contemporaries and even more of his predecessors believed, a divinely ordered world. I am especially interested in how Conrad shows us that, to live a meaningful life, each individual must transform that condition into a value, and how he examines ways this is done, and more often—as in the cases of Jim in *Lord Jim* and Nostromo in the book of that name—is not done.

I was and am also attracted to Conrad's formal innovations: unreliable narrators, frame narrators, disrupted chronology, character doubles, etc. And I have always been interested in the relationship between the personal and the community in Conrad's political novels.

JRL: How has the academic profession changed in the years since you came to Cornell in 1968?

DRS: When I began my career, one had to write critical and scholarly books on canonical writers in American or English literature for tenure and promotion in an English department. The rise of feminist, black, and queer studies, and other forms of cultural studies, has created greater latitude in the choice of subjects; if I had written *Imagining the Holocaust* in my assistant professor years, it might well have been my passport to obscurity, or at least a passport to a less prestigious university. And one could say the same thing about my forthcoming book on *The New York Times*.



JRL: You've had considerable success as a poet and travel writer, as well as a scholar, and I think it's fair to say that you're that rarest of creatures, a public intellectual. Is this part of a guiding scholarly philosophy, or merely the byproduct of a life spent pursuing broad interests?

DRS: Yes, I have often chosen subjects—sometimes interdisciplinary—that have interest beyond the academy, and that at times has given me a crossover audience for my books and a chance to participate in forums beyond the traditional academic world.

I do try to reach a wider audience in some of my writing. I may have been responding to my New York–area upbringing, where we read and talked about ethics, economics, and politics. I was responding, too, to what I felt was an undesirable inward turning by academics in the 1970s and 1980s, when some theoretical discussion used a special and at times arcane vocabulary that became an intimidating weapon to those not in the cognoscenti. Critics spoke Yalespeak or Cornellspeak or fashionable theoryspeak.

I certainly am not a poet on the order of the department's creative giants. But I think it has been important to me to try my hand at different kinds of writing.

JRL: You mentioned your forthcoming book about *The New York Times*, which is years in the making. Your investigations into that august publication have coincided with a period of rapid change in the news media landscape. Can you talk a bit about the book, and what you've discovered about the *Times'* place in this confusing new reality?

DRS: Yes, I am excited to be bringing to a close six years of research on the book, tentatively entitled *Crisis and Turmoil in* The New York Times*: 1999–2009*. It will be published by the SUNY Press. I shall soon be submitting the final draft.

Past and present luminaries at the *Times* have been generous in giving me access, and I have over 40 taped one-on-one interviews, including interviews with the publisher, Arthur Sulzberger, Jr. and all the living executive editors, as well as other masthead figures and major section editors. Basically, I will be putting the *Times* in the context of the evolution of newspapers from print to digital, as well as taking account of the changing economic realities of the newspaper business. My book will present a history of the *Times* in those years, but a history grounded in the *Times* before 1999. This has been quite a project—easily the most complex I have undertaken—because the *Times*, as text, changes every day. And I needed to learn about digital media and business issues—and, no, I am even now far from an expert on all facets—and find what I hope is the right shape for this book, the longest I have ever written.

JRL: You were a pioneer in the now broadly appreciated dialogue between modern art and modern literature. What initially caused you to investigate the connections between the two, and how do you think the relationship of art to literature has changed over the past century?

DRS: I once had a fantasy of doing two Ph.D.s—one in literature and one in art history—but life interfered. I have spent countless hours in museums and I have kept up as much as I could with art in the high modern period, and that resulted in my *Reconfiguring Modernism: Explorations in the*

English
AT CORNELL

English at Cornell is published once a year and is sent to graduates and faculty members of the Department of English. Please send correspondence to Paul Sawyer, Department of English, Cornell University, 250 Goldwin Smith Hall, Ithaca, NY 14853-3201. E-mail: pls12@cornell.edu.

Co-editors: Paul Sawyer, professor of English, and J. Robert Lennon, associate professor of English

Copy editing: Chris Philipp

Layout and design: Laurie Ray

Photos: University Photography

Cornell University is an equal-opportunity, affirmative-action educator and employer.
Printed on recycled paper.
Office of Publications and Marketing
11/2010 5M SL 110042

Relation between Modern Art and Modern Literature, a book anticipated by my discussing literature in relation to art in a number of essays and in some prior books, most notably *Narrative and Representation in Wallace Stevens.*

Cultural innovations in the arts are driven by historical circumstances and individual creativity. In the past century or so, the search for new forms to describe reality accelerated and cross-fertilized one another. So we see that Picasso had much in common with such writers as Joyce and Stevens in his search for multiple perspectives. High modernism is paradoxically both an ideology of possibility and hope—a positive response to difficult circumstances—and an ideology of despair—a response to excessive faith in industrialism, urbanization, so-called technological progress, and the Great War of 1914 to 1918, called for a time the "War to End All Wars." It is not too much to say that modernism is, in part, a response to cultural crisis created in part by Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), which questioned the Bible as revealed history.

JRL: Let me turn to your teaching and Cornell life. You have won Cornell's major teaching awards, and your former graduate students and NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities) participants have put together a festschrift in your honor, *Reading Texts, Reading Lives: Essays in the Tradition of Humanistic Cultural Criticism in Honor of Daniel R. Schwarz*. Can you talk about your experiences as a teacher?

DRS: I am deeply touched by such generous recognition as a teacher. I try to convey to students respect for each of them as individuals; I think I convince most students that I have their interests at heart and want them all to succeed. My courses are challenging and students know that taking my classes means accepting the challenge to think creatively, to read carefully, and to have pride in their work. I am a passionate learner as well as teacher, and I think that helps motivate my students. They know what they say or write matters because they know my own positions are always open to discussion, modification, and reformulation.

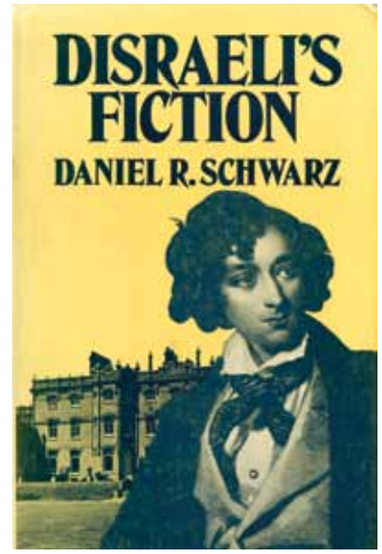
I believe that, as teachers, we establish paradigms for our students. A classroom is, in some ways, a small test version of the larger world; the students have a responsibility to their fellow students and to the defined goals of learning about a particular area of study. In some courses, especially in the Knight Institute first-year seminars, the skills themselves—reading perspicaciously, writing coherently and lucidly as well as arguing convincingly and logically from evidence, and speaking articulately—are the points of the course. But honing those skills are always part of English courses.

I should add that no teacher is the best fit for every student.

JRL: Could you speak more about your philosophy of teaching?

DRS: I think of my classroom as a community of inquiry where we all learn from one another and where we are motivated by curiosity and a belief that knowing matters and verification is possible, even if we all don't need to agree on every detail of a reading. In a community of inquiry, each student understands learning as a process, takes responsibility for being prepared each day, takes assignments seriously, feels in each class as part of a functioning group, and writes assignments with a sense of pride in her or his work and her or his evolving writing voice. Of course, this is an ideal but reaching for the ideal helps create it.

Students learn more effectively and joyfully when we establish communities where they are committed to the course goals, the teacher, and each other. Furthermore, community values carry over into their other courses and other campus activities and community contributions, and in creating citizens who will play an active role in their communities after graduation. I do not agree with my friend Stanley Fish that our job is restricted to the subjects of the syllabus and the geographical location of our classroom.



As a sometime Aristotelian, I ask of students, colleagues, and, most importantly myself, "What is your evidence?" I teach in the spirit that there may be multiple ways of approaching an issue and propose my views in the spirit of "This is true, isn't it?" The "Isn't it" reflects my belief in both pluralism and in the openness of inquiry. I keep in mind that an impressive professor can be an oppressive professor, and try in my classrooms and writing to keep open a spirit of inquiry.

As academics, particularly in the humanities, we are in large part who and what we teach. What mentoring—really another word for teaching—means is caring about the individual with whom one comes into contact as teacher and advisor, and in that role leaving something behind besides information. Mentoring means cultivating potential and helping students and sometimes colleagues discover who they are and who they might be.

Mentoring is an extension of teaching. With doctoral students, the 120 participants in NEH (National Endowment for the Humanities) programs I have directed and younger colleagues, we need to open doors and windows of possibilities without imposing our own ideology.

JRL: Has your teaching changed over time?

DRS: We should grow and evolve in response to the world's changes, but I think my core values are the same. But the digital informational revolution—the Internet—has changed the way we teach and learn. The wall between the student's living space and the classroom has dissolved. I ask all my students to contribute to a course listserv—I stipulate a different number of substantive contributions, depending on the course, although many students choose to write far more. I write my students weekly letters about where we have been and where we are going, with a focus on study questions and bibliography.

To my sometimes chagrin, books and printed newspapers play a smaller role in education. Students depend on the Internet for information, and this cuts down, for better or worse, the time that they spend on research. Students spend quite a bit less time writing on a computer versus the process of typing and retyping and re-retyping papers.

JRL: Has the Cornell student body changed?

DRS: Certainly our student body has evolved over the years and has become diverse. I am now teaching to a much richer and more varied group where difference is respected.

With these changes came changes in how we discuss reading assignments and the writing topics we assign. More than in my early years, I acknowledge the place of resistant reading perspectives—that is the perspective that resists the point of view that an author (or painter) thought he was expressing and built into his text. Often these resistant readings contribute rich feminist, gay, ecological, minority, and other multicultural perspectives that the author (and earlier generations of critics and teachers) ignored.

Today's students are competent, goal-oriented, and Internet savvy, and communicate by means of cell phone, email, Facebook, and MySpace. Activism tends to be less visible because Internet access is basically private, and students passionately debate issues and organize themselves online.

Students used to take pride in cutting the umbilical cord when

continued on page 4

they arrived at Cornell. Paradoxically, today they are often more intellectually and personally mature than in the past, but less independent, in part because they often think of parents as friends as much as authority figures and share their lives with them via text messaging and cell phones. Several students and parents with whom I have spoken in the last year or two feel that parents "are less restrictive" and that conforms to my impression.

What I see today are students who wish to contribute to their various communities, but who have a practical awareness of what can be accomplished. They are certainly much more conscious of the environment than earlier generations of students and are more likely to volunteer at programs aimed at educating prisoners or working with local disadvantaged schoolchildren and less likely to be involved in protests.

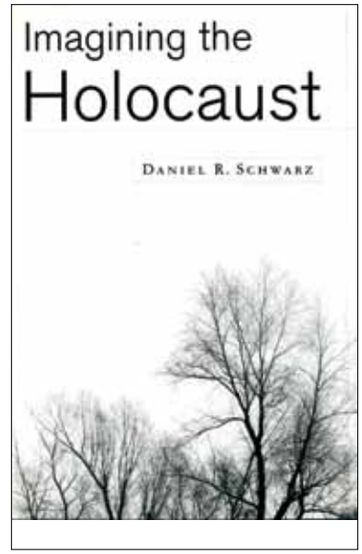
The current generation of students is focused on what happens next. They are more grade oriented than in the past, and more often take courses in which average grades are high, knowledge of which is now accessible on the Internet in a way that it wasn't to past student generations. Decisions about courses and summer jobs—now often non-paying internships—depend often on what is best preparation for graduate school applications and careers. Even though this may be less true for English majors, many of them hedge and double major, choosing for a second major a subject with a more practical bent such as economics.

But are today's students, as some have claimed, cynical careerists? Not in my experience. Yes, students are directed and concerned about a tight job market and, yes, many are more realistic about what they can contribute to saving the world, but I find a strong idealistic strand, too. On the whole, today's students use their time better and accomplish more than any group of students that I ever taught.

JRL: I am impressed by your ability, after more than 40 years, to remain open and available to students. I understand that you also keep in touch with hundreds of former students. As a relatively junior professor who adores his own students, I must confess that I find it a challenge to keep track even of a mere decade's worth. Can you talk about forming and maintaining these relationships?

DRS: It has given me great pleasure to follow my students—and see what they achieve and make of their opportunities. Of course, email now helps, but even before that telephone and snail mail enabled me to keep in touch, and students would—and still do—visit me during reunions or informal campus visits. On occasion, talks at Cornell clubs have helped me keep in touch. When I travel, I enjoying seeing my former undergraduates, especially those with whom I have worked closely on honors projects or taught a number of times.

JRL: On a personal note, I am always impressed by your continued engagement with all things Cornell. You are a strong and passionate voice both in the classroom and in administrative matters as well, and when I started here in 2006, you were the first senior professor to pull me into your office and offer to show me the ropes—a gesture for which I am still



grateful. All this at a time when you'd be more than justified in resting on your laurels and letting other people worry about things. What fuels your tireless commitment to this department and institution? And can you characterize some of the changes our department and institution have undergone during your 42 years here?

DRS: Universities are by nature conservative structurally, even while they are intellectual agents of change. In the face of the financial crises of 2008–09, many policy decisions—such as cutting the Cornell Theatre production budget—have more of an economic component than they once did. But policy decisions, including curricula decisions, probably have more of a political component and an eye to the world beyond the university than they did 50 years ago. That may well be a good thing.

Decision-making continues to move to the central administration. Decisions once made in the college are made in Day Hall; decisions once made in departments are made by college deans, and decisions once made by professors about what they might be teaching are made by department chairs.

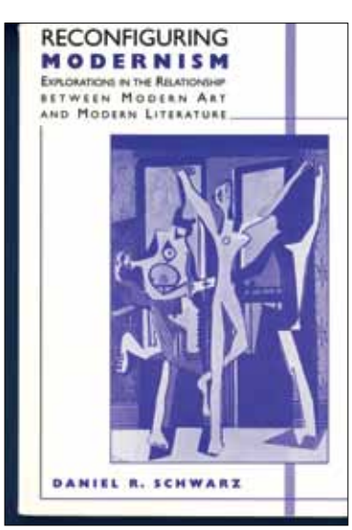
To an extent, the curriculum—at least in the humanities—has moved more to a buyer's market, by which I mean we offer courses the students as clients want rather than simply what the faculty as sellers wanted to teach, even if enrollments were tiny.

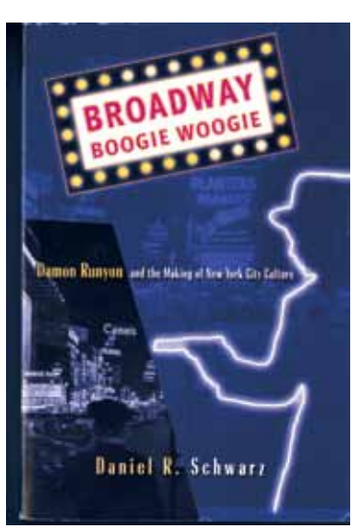
But on the whole, our department has nurtured a spirit of tolerance and generosity and respect for others. To the extent that I can be helpful, I want to maintain those values.

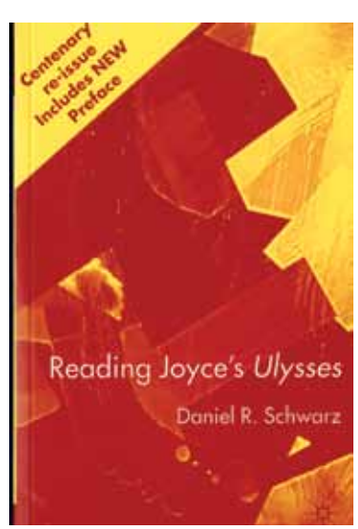
I have been honored to be a colleague of M. H. Abrams, and see him as a model, not only as a scholar but also as a Cornell citizen. Among my own contemporaries, I have admired the exceptional leadership of Laura Brown and Jonathan Culler in maintaining the department's health.

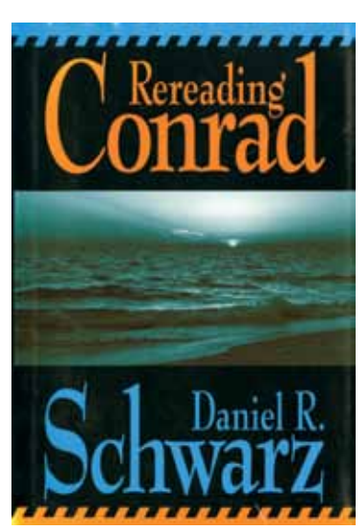
We have right now a terrific younger faculty of assistant professors and recently tenured associate professors, and that makes me extremely optimistic about the future. When I came there were no tenured women or tenured creative writers, to say nothing of black and Asian scholars. With pleasure, I have watched the department evolve to a much more diversified group.

In the end, my participation speaks to my sense of commitment to my students and our community. Our English department—and Cornell University and the College of Arts and Sciences—has given me the opportunity, pleasure, and privilege to teach and write in a wonderfully supportive and intellectually stimulating atmosphere.









My research **at the Folger Shakespeare Library**

by Jenny C. Mann

Jenny C. Mann is an assistant professor and has been with the English department since 2007. Her book-in-progress, Outlaw Rhetoric: Figuring Vernacular Eloquence in Shakespeare's England*, will argue that the translation of classical rhetoric into the everyday vernacular became a means of literary invention in the 16th century. Reading rhetorical handbooks alongside plays, poems, and prose romances, it will show how the translation of Greek and Latin figures of speech into English functions as a plot generator, turning classical figures of transport and exchange into native stories of fairies and Robin Hood.*

This past spring I was lucky enough to spend three months in residence at the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., on a short-term fellowship. I was there to finish research for my forthcoming book, *Outlaw Rhetoric*, and this was my first time back at the Folger since I was a graduate student.

If there is a temple of Shakespeare in America, this is it. Founded by Henry Clay Folger and his wife Emily Jordan Folger, the Folger Shakespeare Library holds the world's largest collection of Shakespeare materials, including 79 copies of the 1623 First Folio edition of Shakespeare's plays (by way of comparison, the British Library owns five copies), as well as major collections of Renaissance printed materials, manuscripts, and art works. Although academics tend to think of the Folger primarily as a research center, the library also provides a number of public programs for students, educators, and visitors, including plays, concerts, and exhibitions. Thus, in addition to being an essential stop for any scholar working on Renaissance materials, the Folger is also a prominent institutional sponsor of "Shakespeare" in public culture.

It's fun to visit the Folger, in large part because the place is so thoroughly unironic about its reverence for the Bard. It's been a long time since I gave myself permission to be hagiographic about Shakespeare, since for me, as for many recent Ph.D.s, an important part of my training was learning to situate Shakespeare's works in the culture from which they emerged. I now tend to think of Shakespeare as one among many contributors to an astonishing explosion of theatrical and poetic production in the late 16th century. But of course, such a perspective isn't really the whole story, as the presence of the Folger Shakespeare Library and its many tourists indicate (not to mention the $6 million price tag of a recently auctioned First Folio, which is the most expensive book in the world, according to Wikipedia, which I never use).

If you've arrived in D.C. by train to Union Station, the Folger is a 15-minute walk into Capitol Hill that takes you past Senate office buildings, the Supreme Court, and finally the Capitol itself. The Folger is also located in the same general vicinity as the Library of Congress, so the neighborhood is filled with a strangely specific mixture of politicians, federal employees, and scholars of the European Renaissance. The library itself is housed in a large, neoclassical marble building that looks a lot like a mausoleum or perhaps the home of a prominent secret society, with bas-relief scenes from Shakespeare's plays (personally selected by Henry Clay Folger) inscribed on the outside. The implication of all this is that Shakespeare, like Washington and Lincoln, is of national importance, and deserves a monument appropriate to his stature.

The reading room of the library, accessible only to scholars, is divided into two chambers. One half is all dark paneling, heavy wood tables, green leather chairs, stained-glass windows, and a massive stone fireplace, and feels like the great-room of a Tudor manor. The other half is more modern in design, filled with beech-wood shelves, modern bookstands, cushioned chairs, and much better lighting. I think it must signify something meaningful about the sort of scholar one is, depending on what side of the room you settle into (me: fake Tudor manor). The ornate side of the reading room is punctuated by a series of curtained and locked glass doors, and every hour or so a docent sweeps back the curtains so that visitors can peer in at the chamber and its inhabitants. Whenever I hear the rattle of the curtain being pulled aside I sit up straight and look like a proper scholar in situ, very deliberate as I turn my pages, so as not to let down the tourists.

It is always an international group of researchers in the reading room—this spring there were scholars from Argentina, Italy, and Britain as well as the United States. I find it funny that UK-based scholars have to make the trip to D.C. in order to conduct research on Shakespeare and the London stage, but they don't seem to mind. Rather, these scholars seem to enjoy using their summers to follow a Renaissance research circuit that takes them from D.C. to Austin (the Ransom Center at UT-Austin) and finally to Pasadena (the Huntington Library). You get to know the other readers and fellows at tea, which is held every day in the basement of the library at precisely 3:00 p.m. At exactly 3:30, a member of the staff rings a bell to alert everyone that tea is over and it is time to return to the library. Then you have just an hour and fifteen minutes of research time remaining before another bell signals the closing of the reading room. The bell-ringing should seem weird, but in fact it's a fairly efficient means of communication and also suits the general mood of the reading room, where the old (David Garrick's "Shakespeare" chair) and the new (a woman in the director's chair) co-exist.

Since I began post-graduate study, the widespread digitization of early printed texts has completely altered the way scholars of early periods conduct research, so much so that it can be hard to remember how valuable it is to take up residence in an archive. Although I may be able to conduct research from the computer in my office in Goldwin Smith, it is a very narrow, overly efficient kind of investigation. If I know exactly what I'm looking for, I can log on to Early English Books Online and download a digital image of an early text—say, a 1632 English translation of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*—but this method does not allow for the happy accidents that emerge when one is situated in an archive—such as the discovery of a truncated translation of Virgil's *Aeneid* appended to the same volume of Ovidian verse. While at the Folger, in addition to studying manuscript sources unavailable online, I can also call up multiple copies of a printed text to search for meaningful variants or marginalia. If I have difficulty deciphering something I can seek assistance from one of the many expert librarians and archivists on staff as well as my fellow readers. Apart from the sheer blessing of having a peaceful place to conduct intensive study, archives like the Folger provide a meeting place for scholars. Leaving our offices and entering into such a community keeps our ideas in circulation, and these interchanges can in turn prevent our inquiries from either losing rigor or becoming solipsistic. Visiting the Folger this spring thus reminded me to encourage my students to get inside our own library at Cornell and muck around, rather than conducting all of their research off-site in the privacy of their dormitory rooms.

The Folger may be an odd place (see: bell-ringing), but it's also an extremely classy place (you know what I mean by this if you've ever endured the laser-light show "Shakespearience" in Stratford-upon-Avon), and I highly recommend paying a visit and peering in at the scholars in the reading room the next time you are in D.C.

Limping to the finish: **A novelist contemplates the end**

by J. Robert Lennon

J. Robert Lennon is an associate professor who has been with the English department since 2006. He is the author of seven books of fiction and many short stories and reviews, and is presently at work on a novel, Familiar.

A few weeks ago, I wrote the last sentence of a novel I've been working on for a year. I saved the file, backed it up, printed it out, and turned off my computer. You would think that the next step would be to open a bottle of champagne and have a party. Instead, I felt mostly relief and unease, akin to the feeling of having a malignant tumor excised from your body: you're glad it's gone, but you suffer under the grim certainty that you haven't seen the last of it.

Back when I was a kid, and filled with vague literary ambitions, I had a very specific fantasy about finishing a novel. I'd be writing it in pencil on yellow legal pads, and would speed up as I progressed, ending with a marathon 24-hour session, crowded ashtray by my side, cigarette pinched between my second and third fingers, the smoke curling up into my enormous beard. I would scrawl the last sentence at sunrise, and then hand the pages to my wife/secretary to type. (She is really hot, of course, and a genius in her own right in some other field, like neuroscience or orchestra conducting.) Then I would wake up my editor in New York with a phone call: "It's finished." He would invite me down to the city for a steak-and-bourbon dinner, then write me a gigantic check.

Well, I did manage to grow a beard. But I never took up smoking. My brilliant and beautiful wife would likely roll her eyes at the notion of being my personal secretary, and the enormous check remains elusive. The most unrealistic part of that fantasy, though, remains the notion of finishing a novel. I've published half a dozen of the things, and have finished exactly zero.

Sure, I've stopped writing a bunch of them. But none of them are finished. They are suspended in a state of permanent incompleteness.

Here's how it really works, at least for me. I start a novel and write with blithe self-confidence for 125 to 150 pages, during which I feel very much like the bearded chain-smoker of my childhood fantasy. Then I suffer a crisis of confidence. The novel has gone off the rails. I attempt to right it, knowing that, no matter what happens now, I'm going to have to go back and fix the beginning.

But the mistakes begin to compound themselves. People's names change, and their ages. Children vanish and reappear; marriages dissolve and are restored. Plot and character clash: personality traits I chose at random on page 25 become increasingly incongruous with events, and by page 300 characters are forced to perform against type, like stage actors.

By now I have a mental list of major errors, and once I've finished the draft (an occasion that provides only the slightest frisson of personal satisfaction before it fades into the past), it has turned into a written list. The pages of the first draft accumulate furious scribbles, some tearing through the paper. Draft two begins: stuff I once loved is eliminated, and stuff I don't love but need to include is shoehorned in.

Now I give it to my wife and a couple of my friends, and they all find completely different, utterly contradictory mistakes. Draft three attempts to reconcile their advice in a way that will please none of them. This one heads to my agent, whose response, over the phone, begins with the slowly uttered phrase, "I think this one could someday be good." Draft four goes to my editor, who says a version of the same thing. By this time the novel on the page has grown very far from the one in my head, which contains all the mutually exclusive plot elements I've devised, along with the crowded, impossible streets of the town the novel is set in, and the many superimposed rooms of the houses my schizophrenic, dissociative-identity-suffering characters occupy. By this time I've secured a promise of publication via a series of desperate editorial promises, and at draft eight my editor is seeing a fairly coherent story, which has been developed under his careful stewardship. But I'm still seeing an unfinished mess.

Then come the page proofs (heavy typo-laden), galleys (more mistakes), and at last, the final draft, the one the reviewers will read. By this time I'm so terrified of having blown it that I can barely crack the thing. Where is my *Back-to-the-Future* moment, the one where George McFly, rendered suave by time travel, smoothly and confidently slices open his crate of bestsellers?

By this time, of course, I have transferred my remaining reservoir of personal confidence to a new novel, which is presently suspended in its state of imaginary potential perfection. The steak dinner, the check, the giant beard are all still possible! Meanwhile, the unfinished non-masterpiece in hard covers before me has already been declared mediocre by Kirkus.

Well, of course it's mediocre—it isn't finished! In my mind, the characters will continue their lives. In the shower, with l'esprit de l'escalier, I will think of hilarious things for them to say and do, which I will add to the metastasizing agglomeration that is the novel in my head.

The key to being a happy writer, of course, is to leave it there. Some writers—the famous example is Henry James—have actually transferred the long-gestating mental novel to the page, and perhaps in doing so they have achieved the impossible: actually finishing something. For the rest of us, though, incompleteness is the rule.

Why? It's because we're sentimental, and afraid of death, the ultimate act of completion. Indeed, literary fiction, with its artful non-ending endings, is the most sentimental of the literary genres: it's the genre for the closure-averse. No catching the killer for us; no marrying the hunk or colonizing the planet or driving the outlaw from town. No, we literary novelists are content to just stop, sometimes (James Joyce) in mid-sentence, to avoid the thing we most desire: the end.

Obituary: Jonathan Bishop

by Neil Hertz

Professor Emeritus of English Jonathan Bishop, who helped initiate Cornell's first-year writing seminars, died Jan. 22 at age 82 at Kendal at Ithaca, where he had been a longtime resident. Neil Hertz, a recent M. H. Abrams Distinguished Visiting Professor who also taught English at Cornell from 1961 to 1983, offers this reminiscence.

Jonathan and I arrived at Cornell in 1961 and shared an office for the next five years, GS 239, later Archie Ammons's office. Sitting there, looking up from grading papers, or in-between seeing students, we talked a lot. We discovered we admired some of the same books—*Middlemarch,* Boswell's *Johnson,* Doughty's *Travels in Arabia,* Wordsworth's *Prelude*. And that we both had had our sense of ourselves as teachers shaped by time spent at Amherst College, he as a faculty member, I, some years earlier, as a student. Indeed, it was in part out of our conversations about the idiosyncratic Amherst freshman English course that, the next year, Jonathan and Taylor Stoehr and I launched the autobiographical writing course that stayed on the department's books, usually under Jonathan's supervision, until the 1980s. In those first years, just before Freedom Summer and the anti-war protests began to focus the energies of many college students, being asked to think and write about their experiences at Cornell struck a chord, spoke to their hopes and disaffections—and produced some fine work on the freshmen's part, and some exhilarating and memorable moments for their teachers.

In our conversations, as in the classroom, Jonathan was intensely declarative. Words like "perhaps" or "apparently"—necessities, one would think, of East Coast elite intellectual discourse—were not part of his lexicon. He could be funny, ironical, whimsically extravagant, he could shape subtly inflected propositions, but always in the declarative mode, as sayings he stood behind. This was invigorating for his office mate, and not a little daunting. Until then, I'd never met anyone so intelligent who was also so sure of his judgments. Not that his judgments were always correct, or that he couldn't revise them. When we first met, Jonathan was in the process of embracing Catholicism. We didn't talk about that, but we did talk a good deal about Wordsworth and the Romantic sublime—a topic of both his writing and my own—and at one point I realized that Jonathan was assuming that my interest in writers like Wordsworth and Milton was likely to lead—as it had in his own case—to some spiritual awareness and, possibly, to a full religious conversion. No such luck. But our friendship had no trouble surviving that misapprehension.

I had a note from our colleague Mike Colacurcio recently that spoke to this intensity of Jonathan's. "He was the single most conscientious—least careerist—academic I ever met," Mike wrote, "with a heart so purely willing one thing that it was almost scary. He believed in the truth, found only part of it in British and American literature, and went looking for it everywhere else, whether he ever got a raise or not." Mike adds, "Or does that mean only that he had some private money?"

Mike was joking, but he was right. In fact, "private money" was what Jonathan used to publish two of his six books. Harvard had brought out *Emerson on the Soul* in 1964, a beautiful and wise book that Jonathan later referred to wryly as "my tenure book . . . *Emerson on the Whole*." In 1972, at Mike Abrams' suggestion, a distinguished New York house, George Braziller, had published *Something Else*. But Jonathan was suspicious of the costs of distinction. In the fall of 1974, I had a letter from him that said:

> I spent the summer re-writing and re-writing my *Who Is Who* book, coming to some sort of an end just as classes started. I wrote Braziller, to whom I was supposed to show it, discouraging them from taking anything so impossible; and then they didn't answer, which topped my self-destructiveness with theirs. I inherited some money from my mother's death last spring, so I plan now to go ahead and get it printed locally in 200 or so copies. That ought to be some kind of fun; whatever the hassles, one is able to choose more of what goes on than with a publisher.

I was in Paris that fall, and, knowing that Jonathan had begun working his way through the Old Testament, a Hebrew dictionary and grammar at hand, I'd written him that my apartment building had a Hasidic rabbi and his family living in the courtyard. His letter closed with a reference to this: "Meanwhile I plug away daily on Genesis, having arrived at the chapter where Lot and his daughters misbehave. Could there be a movie version of that? Daddy in a shrimel, the fur hat of your neighbor, Jane Fonda for the eldest daughter, what's-her-name Schneider for the younger—and who for the leader of the mob of Sodomites?"

Six books, then. *Emerson on the Soul* (1964), *Something Else* (1972), *Who Is Who* (1975), *The Covenant: A Reading* (1982), *Some Bodies: The Eucharist and Its Implications* (1992), and *In Time* (1999). It may surprise some of his former colleagues that, in addition to his teaching, in addition to his stints at area shelters and soup kitchens, Jonathan was one of the most "productive" members of the College of Arts and Sciences. Anyone who looked him up in his third-floor office could see him at work, winter and summer, calligraphy pen in hand, taking notes in those large unlined notebooks, the plan of his current writing project diagrammed and tacked to a nearby wall. He read in order to write, and his reading had an astonishing range. In the 10 years it took him to compose *Some Bodies*, he read the pertinent saints (Paul and Augustine and Thomas) as well as dozens of theologians and scholars of the Eucharist. He also incorporated works by scientists, philosophers, theorists of metaphor, historians, feminist scholars, and poets. And he did not exclude personal anecdote, ending the work with two stories, one about a recent walk around Walden Pond, the other about his rescue and "burial at sea" in Beebe Lake, of a dead goldfish he'd found floating in a Kendal aquarium.

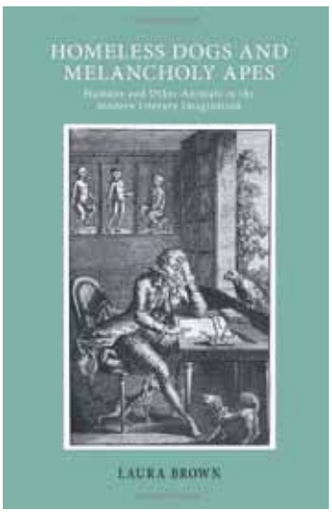
I want to close with some words about Jonathan's particular gift, most evident in the distinctive blend of anecdote and reflection that characterized all his writing. Jonathan actually thought about what happened to him. That cast of mind, I've found, is rare enough. Rarer still is the ability to weave one's experience and one's thinking about it into articulate form. Not all writers, not even all good writers, can do that; Jonathan could. I think he learned it from Emerson; it's certainly what he responded to in Emerson, what he wrote eloquently about in that early book, and what he practiced in his own later works, which are invariably at once speculative and autobiographical. Commenting on some lines from Emerson's essay "Spiritual Laws," he had written:

> We all know our experience as progress through a universe of events that is charged with the quality of our minds and repeats the structure of our psychic constitution. But this cloudy motion is too often downgraded to a blur, an ineluctable static interfering with our perception of "objective," that is, conventional reality. But let us attend to the details of what is inevitable until it becomes meaningful, Emerson answers in rebuke and encouragement. Examine what happens anyway, the stones on which we do in fact stub our toe—to these our line of vision is naturally perpendicular, and we can see, if the spirit wills, exactly what they are.

"Let us attend to the details of what is inevitable until it becomes meaningful." A lovely phrase from the next-to-last page of *Emerson on the Soul*. There, it was intended as a valedictory. I think it can serve here to gesture at what Jonathan had to teach—in class, in his writings, and in his dealings with his friends.

Recent Faculty Publications

Rick Bogel has new papers published and forthcoming, including "Toward a New Formalism: The Intrinsic and Related Problems in Criticism and Theory," in the anthology *New Formalism* (Fordham University Press); an entry, "formalism (in theory and criticism)" for the new edition of *The Princeton Encyclopedia of Poetry and Poetics*; and a plenary address, "Textual Infatuation, True Infatuation: Ransom, Adorno, and the Unfairness of Formalism" for the conference "New Formalism, Neo-Formalism, and the Reassessment of Form, Tropes, and Genre in Contemporary Literary Scholarship," at the University of Ghent in September.



Laura Brown has published a new book, *Homeless Dogs and Melancholy Apes: Humans and Other Animals in the Modern Literary Tradition*, with the Cornell University Press. The book shows how the literary works of the 18th century use animal-kind to bring abstract philosophical, ontological, and metaphysical questions into the realm of everyday experience, affording a uniquely flexible perspective on difference, hierarchy, intimacy, diversity, and transcendence.

Grant Farred edited the Summer 2009 issue of *South Atlantic Quarterly*. "Africana Thought" brings together scholars from a range of disciplines—including philosophy, anthropology, and literature—who are committed to thinking about the condition of contemporary black life.

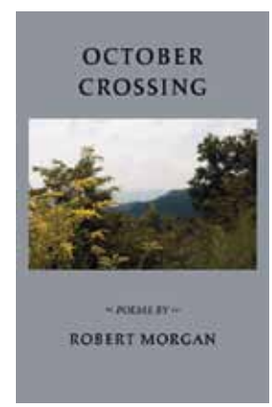
Alice Fulton's short story "A Shadow Table" was reprinted in *Best American Short Stories 2009*. Her poem "Claustrophilia" appeared in the Aug. 2, 2010 issue of *The New Yorker*, and their Book Bench blog published an interview with her on July 28, 2010.

Andrew Galloway has published a number of new essays, including "Alliterative Poetry in Old Jerusalem: The Siege of Jerusalem and Its Sources," in *Medieval Alliterative Poetry: Essays in Honour of Thorlac Turville-Petre* (Four Courts Press, 2010); "Visions and Visionaries," in *The Oxford Handbook of Medieval Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2010); "Gower's *Confessio Amantis*, the *Prick of Conscience*, and the History of the Latin Gloss in Early English Literature," in *John Gower: Manuscripts, Readers, Contexts* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009); "The Past," in *A Concise Companion to Middle English Literature: 1100–1500* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2009); and "The Economy of Need in Late Medieval English Literature," in *Viator 40*. His book *Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Culture* will be published by Cambridge University Press in 2011.

J. Robert Lennon has had new stories published in *The Paris Review*, *Salamander*, *Electric Literature*, and *Weird Tales*. He wrote a review of the new Bret Easton Ellis novel for the *London Review of Books* and a profile of Margaret Atwood's post–*Handmaid's Tale* career for the Canadian monthly *The Walrus*. "In the Presence of Absence: or, Thanks, Blanks!," a talk on the subject of negative space in creative writing, was delivered at the Colgate Writers' Conference in June. In addition, he has published a free e-book of incidental writings called *Video Game Hints, Tricks, and Cheats*. It can be downloaded at www.jrobertlennon.com.

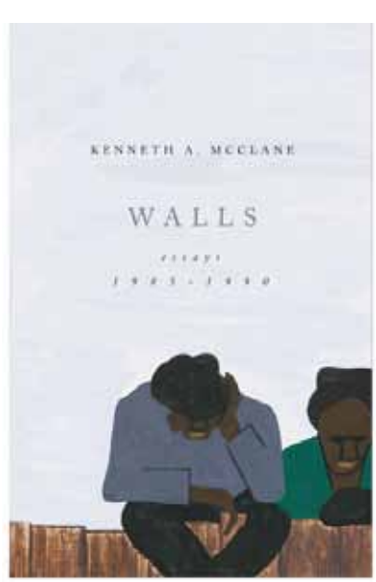
Kenneth McClane's book *Walls: Essays 1985–1990*, which was originally published by Wayne State University Press in 1991, will be reprinted, with a new introduction, by the University of Notre Dame Press this September. Also, his book *Color: Essays on Race, Family and History* (University of Notre Dame Press 2009), was awarded the Gold Medal for the best book of essays published in 2009 by *ForeWord Reviews* magazine.

Satya Mohanty has edited a new book, *The Future of Diversity: Academic Leaders Reflect on American Higher Education* (co-edited with Daniel Little, chancellor of the University of Michigan–Dearborn). The book, published in June by Palgrave Macmillan, contains essays on the subject of campus diversity and how to re-conceive it in the present context. An op-ed on campus diversity appeared in June in *Inside Higher Ed*, and an essay on a 16th-century Indian purana (a poem sung ritually by women every year during the harvest season), "Alternative Modernities and Medieval Indian Literature: The Oriya Lakshmi Purana as Radical Pedagogy," appeared in January in the literary theory journal *Diacritics*. The essay, which analyzes the 500-year-old text as radically feminist and anti-caste, has been translated into Hindi by professors Sanjay Kumar and Archana Kumar of Banaras Hindu University and published in the Indian journal *Alochana*. It has also led to the formation of two collaborative research projects in India, one based at Ravenshaw University, the other at Banaras Hindu University.



Robert Morgan was honored in a special issue of *The Southern Quarterly*. The issue (Vol. 47, No. 3, Spring 2010) featured 12 new poems by Morgan, an excerpt from his novel-in-progress, *Appalachian Trail*, and critical essays celebrating his work. Jesse Graves, editor of the issue, wrote in his introduction: "[Morgan] has become not only one of the most celebrated writers from the Appalachian region, but he must now be considered among the foremost of American writers." In addition, a new poetry collection, *October Crossing*, has been published.

Helena Maria Viramontes has published a new essay, "Divining Love," in the anthology *Women in the Fullness of Time: Thirty-two women over fifty talk about life*. The book is out now from Simon & Schuster/Atrias Books. She has also written two book reviews for *Ms* magazine.



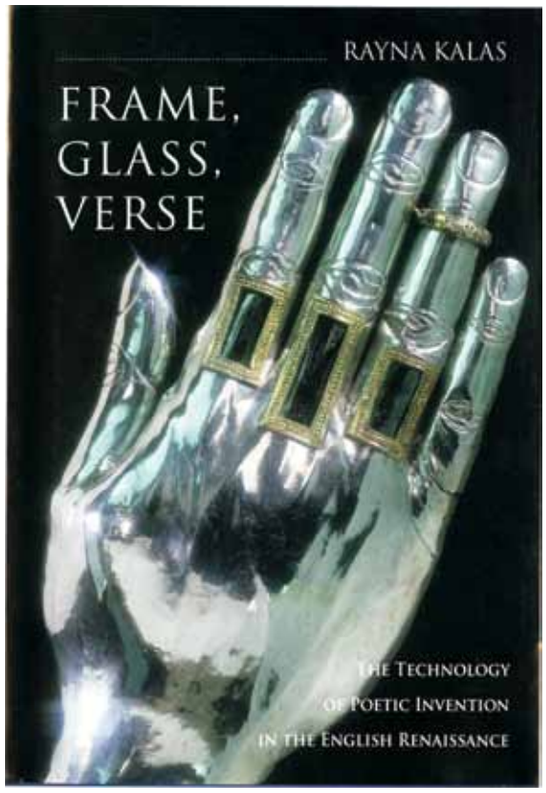
Samantha Zacher, along with Andy Orchard of Trinity College, has edited *New Readings in the Vercelli Book*. The late-10th-century Vercelli book contains one of the earliest surviving collections of homilies and poetry in the English language. This new volume addresses central questions concerning the manuscript's intended use, mode of compilation, and purpose, and offers a variety of approaches on such topics as orthography, style, genre, theme, and source-study.

Books by Faculty

Rayna Kalas. *Frame, Glass, Verse. The Technology of Poetic Invention in the English Renaissance.* (Cornell University Press, 2007)

By Paul Sawyer

Our way of thinking about language and meaning is profoundly influenced by two inventions that date from the Renaissance: the four-sided detachable picture-frame and the clear glass mirror.



Both emerged at the same time as perspective painting, which was experienced as a framed window through which one viewed a realistic world. For moderns, to know something, one must "frame" it (in order to "view" it as an object or idea separate from other objects); and to interpret something, one must look "through" the image or letter for the concept it stands for. In the study of literature, we've inherited a post-Kantian notion of the aesthetic as a realm "framed" and separated off from the everyday, and a notion of meaning as ideal—as reflecting an order of reality that transcends the merely material.

For this reason, Rayna Kalas argues in her new book, commentators on Shakespeare and his contemporaries have usually read them in terms of modern ideas of framing and transparency (or metaphor). But this type of reading loses sight of the historical difference between the Renaissance and us; it also loses sight of the Renaissance belief that poetry is also a material technology, like a picture-frame or like crystal glass. Kalas's largest aim in *Frame, Glass, Verse* is therefore to present a more accurate view of Renaissance thinking, and also to recover a valuable understanding of the material character of language and the sign.

In the first part of her book, she explores meanings of "frame," which among other things meant "structure," and then reads visual artifacts and poems in which the frame is part of the structure and significance of the work, not simply a device for setting the work off as an aesthetic object. In the second part, she looks at sonnets by Shakespeare, as well as poems and prose by Puttenham, Gascoigne, Donne, Herbert, and others, that use the imagery of glass, either as mirrors or windows. She argues that these images function not just as metaphors but primarily as a set of resemblances: all are made of glass or glass-like, a quality that poetic language has as well. Shakespeare's sonnets, for example, are like glass "not only because of their metaphorical capacity to mirror" but also because of a perceived "material similarity to glass in being both liquid and brittle," a material quality that allows the poems "to represent time and motion" even if their form (ink on a page) appears static. For Renaissance writers, she concludes, language is "not simply a symbolic system of representation" but also "temporal matter," something existing "in and of this world, a material instrument of observation, perception, and reception."

In both its scope and detail, *Frame, Glass, Verse* is a rich and challenging book, written with sharp focus and high intelligence.

Obituary: Robin Doxtater

by Marianne Marsh

English department accounts coordinator Robin Doxtater passed away in November 2009 after a valiant struggle against cancer. Born and raised in Ithaca, Robin spent her entire 22-year Cornell career with the Department of English. Marianne Marsh offers this tribute, adapted from her remarks delivered at Robin's funeral.

The day you walk into the English office as a staff member, you become part of the family. But it wasn't always this way. Robin Doxtater was just 20 years old when she came to work at the English department at Cornell. I can't say for sure, but it may well be that the era of camaraderie, teamwork, and sisterhood was ushered in with Robin's arrival in October of 1986.

As families go, we've had our share of bickering, but in our case it was rarely mean-spirited and always without gossip or backbiting. Robin just didn't know how to do that. And we have our office jargon and inside jokes. I doubt anyone here knows the meaning of an "email sneaker," which desk accessory is called a "flenker," or what you'll find in Room 231. There are also the affectionate nicknames, such as Sunshine, Rocket Boy, and Weasel. Robin was Binky.

One of our office traditions was to order lunch on Fridays—pizza, sandwiches, Chinese—anything that would get delivered. Invariably on Friday morning someone would query, "What are we ordering today?" And someone would usually answer: "I know what Binky wants." L5 on the Chinese menu. With pork fried rice. But she'd suffer through pizza if she had to.

She was as professional as she was playful. When asked to put together a spreadsheet for a report, usually at the last minute, she'd produce something understandable and accurate, ahead of schedule. Fiscal year closing is a nightmare in some departments. Not for us—Robin was always current with bill-paying and fund transfers. She often had to correspond with faculty regarding their funding, which could tend to be delicate, especially if she had to convey bad news or enforce transaction policies. The communications she crafted always reflected a professional yet warm demeanor, and her skill with tone and language more than met the high standards of English faculty, And then when you'd least expect it, during an office banter session, she'd come out with some sing-songy chant from childhood, like "takes one to know one, better one to show one," or "I know you are but what am I?" She had a strong work ethic—almost to a fault—and actually felt guilty for not being at work when she was ill.

There aren't enough words to describe what a sterling and cherished friend and colleague Robin has been over these last 23 years, so I'm not even going to try. Instead, I'll let the words of many of the members of our department speak.

Mary Pat Brady: "Robin was incredibly patient with me, and because I was so bad about records, she needed to be patient."

Cynthia Chase: "She was brave about facing her illness and helped me through mine by her warmth and directness."

Laurel Guy: "Ernest Hemingway said courage is grace under pressure. He was describing Robin. I will miss her twinkle, her smile, and sense of humor. I will always remember her steadfast and fierce love of her family. And whenever I feel irritated by the problems in my own life, I will hear Robin saying to me how she would trade my problems for hers any day . . . reminding me that all things are minor compared to losing your health."

Stephanie Vaughn: "Robin Doxtater was one of the most even-tempered and kind people on our planet. She seemed incapable of becoming flustered or impatient and certainly incapable of being anything but good to her family, her friends, and her colleagues.

At Cornell, she was so scrupulously well organized that sometimes she seemed to be working ahead of schedule. She was calm when others were agitated. She had a gift for working productively, and she had a gift for working productively with certain incompetent people she had to deal with day to day—and by 'incompetent people' I refer of course to the English professors who could not find their receipts and did not even recall having charged something to their Cornell research accounts. She handled all of us with unsurpassed diplomacy."

Debra Fried: "Her steadiness of temper, utter reliability, and good humor made her a treasure. She was family!"

Paul Sawyer: "You didn't have to see Robin behind her partition to know she was there, a person could sense her presence. And no one who felt Robin's presence needs a description. How would you describe it, anyway? Her deep, unfailing sweetness of temper, her readiness to help, the kindness and joy she could radiate in a single word or phrase, or by a wordless smile . . . you had to know her. Fortunately, we did. We had over 20 years to our good fortune. It wasn't enough. The place she leaves behind will always be empty because no one will be able to take her place. Our family is diminished. But at the same time, there is no emptiness because she's left us with so much. Full, rich memories of an amazing person, a person without compare. They will always be with us."

Darlene Flint: "She listened and never said 'Shut up, Dar,' or even 'quiet down, Dar. You're a big mouth."

Edgar Rosenberg: "Robin, you were one of the kindest, most caring persons I have met in my 84 years.'"

Vicky Brevetti: "I always admired Robin for the great qualities she possessed that made her such a wonderful human being—she was intelligent, great at her job—she knew it inside and out. She was reliable, helpful, gentle, quiet, compassionate, funny, could be a little naughty at times with her wisecracks, a great friend, and she loved her family dearly. What I didn't know about Robin, though, was the amount of inner strength and fortitude she possessed. I have never seen someone display such courage, determination, and have the ability to attack a bad situation head on like Robin did, never giving up, always holding out hope. What a brave soul. Robin became more than a friend and co-worker to me, she became my role model. What an angel."

letter from the chair

The Department of English at Cornell is weathering the budgetary climate-change remarkably well, thanks in large part to the support of our alumni. The Creative Writing Program has had an astonishingly successful Reading Series again this year, including visits by such prize-winning literati as Toni Morrison, Billy Collins, Natasha Tretheway, and Paul Muldoon, and we are looking forward to kicking off our new roster of readings with a visit by the acclaimed novelist Julia Alvarez, author of *How the Garcia Girls Lost Their Accents* and, more recently, *Saving the World* and *Return to Sender*. We are also looking forward to the arrival of our new distinguished writer-in-residence, Stewart O'Nan, a prolific author and Cornell MFA, who will be celebrating with us the publication of his new novel, *Emily, Alone,* while he is teaching here this coming spring. We also have our alumni to thank for funding a series of courses on Toni Morrison during her visit here, so that undergraduates had the opportunity not only to read the famous Cornellian and Nobel Laureate for an entire semester, but also to meet her and hear her read from her latest novel, *A Mercy.*

We have established a new lecture series for modern literature, thanks to the generosity of Wendy Rosenthal Gellman '77. For our initial event, we invited Brian Boyd, the biographer of our late colleague Vladimir Nabokov, to discuss the first publication of Nabokov's unfinished novel, *The Original of Laura.* Boyd, a professor of English at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, also spoke about his new book, *On the Origin of Stories: Evolution, Cognition and Fiction,* as part of a celebration of the sesquicentennial of Charles Darwin's landmark study, *On the Origin of Species.*

We are hosting a series of conferences on new directions in literary and cultural studies, all of which will culminate in publication. Each of these conferences is hosted by one or more Cornell English professors, who will edit and contribute to the final collection. We began this past spring with Grant Farred's project, "Theory Now," which is already in print, and we will continue this year with Eric Cheyfitz's conference, "Sovereignty, Indigeneity, and the Law," co-hosted with the American Indian Program and Africana Studies, and in the spring semester, my own conference on "Digital Desire," on the language of sexuality in the age of the Internet.

"If there's a book you really want to read but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it."

–*Toni Morrison*

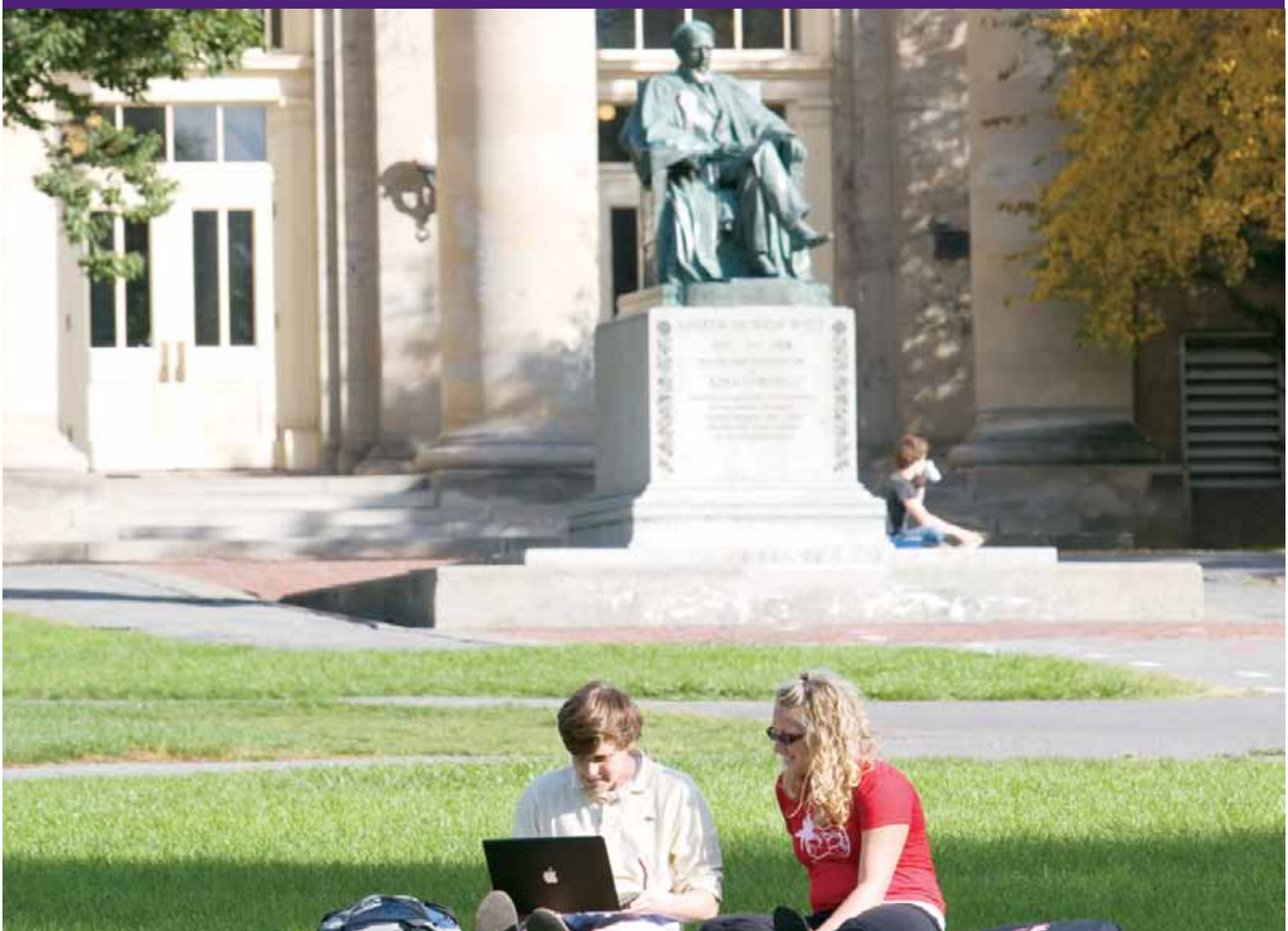
CORNELL Writers

This year, we are pleased to announce our appointment of Ian Balfour as the M. H. Abrams Distinguished Visiting Professor. He will teach courses on Romanticism, literary theory, and film noir. We have also appointed the distinguished novelist, essayist, poet, and translator, Anne Carson, as an A. D. White Professor-at-Large for the next six years. Professor Carson, who teaches classics and comparative literature at the University of Michigan, is the recipient of Guggenheim and MacArthur "Genius" Fellowships and is the author of *Eros the Bittersweet, Autobiography of Red,* and *Glass, Irony, and God,* as well as translations of Sappho, Aeschylus, and Euripides. I recommend *NOX*, her brilliant new book-in-a-box, an innovative and elegiac literary accomplishment that defies easy description.

Enrollments in English courses are up this year at Cornell, despite a nationwide trend in the other direction. Students from across the university, the majority of them not even in the College of Arts and Sciences, are drawn to our traditional courses and also some fascinating newer ones, such as "Weird Stories," "Magical Realism," "Gothic Literature," "The Great Cornell Novel," and "The Literature of 9/11." "The English Literary Tradition" has surged in popularity recently and is one of a series of Gateway Courses, two of which are now required for the major. The Gateway Courses also include introductory surveys of American literature, literary theory, great poets, and world literature in English. Among our numerous visiting faculty, we are very pleased to announce the addition of two new permanent faculty members this year: Cathy Caruth, who is a groundbreaking theorist of narrative and trauma as well as a specialist in Romantic literature, and the poet Joanie Mackowski, whose latest volume, *View from a Temporary Window,* was published this year.

Let me close by noting that you can now purchase a delightful new invention, a Writers at Cornell T-shirt, with a Uris Library tower made up of fiction and poetry written by Cornell alumni. The T-shirt was designed in honor of Toni Morrison's visit and bears her admirable advice that we should all take to heart: "If there is a book you really want to read but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it."

Ellis Hanson
Professor and Chair
Department of English

Cornell University
English at Cornell
250 Goldwin Smith Hall
Ithaca, New York 14853-3201

Nonprofit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Cornell University