English AT CORNELL

A NEWSLETTER FROM THE DEPARTMENT OF ENGLISH

FALL 2005 VOL. 8

THE FUTURE of the Humanities

A View from the English Department (Part I)

Introduction

What should be the role of the humanities in a great research university? What should be their role in society, in this century?

In his State of the University Address for fall 2004, then-President Jeffrey Lehman outlined the university's mission in terms of three specific areas: life in the age of the genome, wisdom in the age of digital information, and sustainability in the age of development.

The chairs of several humanities departments, including English, responded to the president's call with a paper titled "The Humanities in the Twenty-First Century," in which they made a case for placing the humanities at the core of the university curriculum. "One of the issues contemporary societies face," they write, "is to understand how our domains of knowledge are expanding almost exponentially, while our ability to process and control this knowledge has not kept pace." Pointing to the "difficulty of sustaining an informed citizenry" in the face of this expansion, they suggest that "a great research university must not only produce knowledge but explore the meanings, ramifications, and dissemination of that knowledge." The humanities, they argue, must continue to act as "the dimension of intellectual life that seeks expressly to integrate the myriad activities and achievements of the university."

Since the writing of this document, the English Department has held a number of conversations on the future of the humanities. (It has even set up a special group, the Action Committee, to consider ideas and strategies.) Now, with the unexpected resignation of President Lehman and the search for a new president—a transition that coincides with the start of a major capital fund-raising campaign—the debate over Cornell's future has become even more pertinent. For these reasons, we have chosen to devote two special issues of *English at Cornell* to essays by faculty members on this large and important subject.

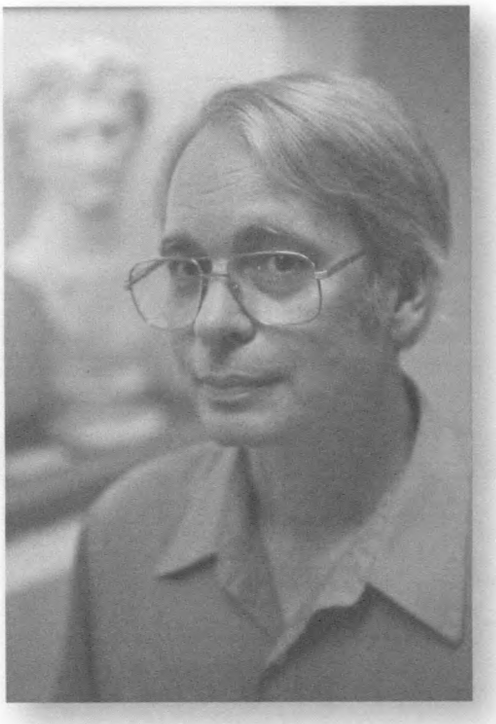
For the first special issue, Laura Brown has devoted her third and final letter as chair of the department to summarizing the most dramatic shifts in the profession of English that she has noticed in the past three years. The three featured essays, by Stuart Davis, Lamar Herrin, and Rayna Kalas, take more specific topics: the place of teaching, the place of creative writing, and the place of poetry. Each writer responds to the questions, What is the function of the humanities in a new century? How are the teaching and reading of literature likely to change?

Next year's issue of *English at Cornell* will continue this discussion, with essays devoted to the role of the humanities in the world outside the university. We welcome your comments and suggestions on this timely topic. Feel free to share your thoughts via e-mail: pls12@cornell.edu.

—Paul Sawyer

Cornell University

The Public Imaginary:
A Report on Teaching



by Stuart Davis

***Stuart Davis**, a senior lecturer in English, teaches Shakespeare, news media, expository writing, mystery fiction, and the literature of philosophy. He received the Clark Outstanding Teaching Award in 1995 and the Paul Award for Excellence in Advising in 2003. In this essay, he makes a case for teaching popular culture, newscasts, and other non-traditional materials as a way of making students critically aware of the codes, structures, and functions of the media images that surround them—an information economy that some writers have described as a pseudo-public space, or "phantom public sphere." In this way, he suggests, teaching the humanities can help students creatively confront the felt powerlessness and sense of unreality reflected in films like* The Matrix, *as well as developing more adequate conceptions of human reality in the twenty-first century.*

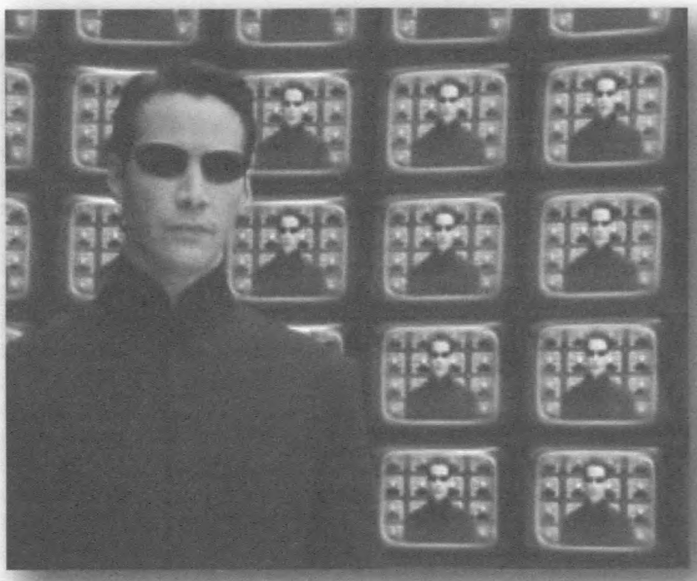
Humanities teachers of the twenty-first century practice and profess the arts of imagination with some confidence, but with "the imaginary"—a word often used for the collective repository of shared imaginings—we are less comfortable. "The imaginary" seems to intend an "it" of which I am not really happy to know that I am a part, unless of course I am teaching and want to sound smart about it. It sounds specular and unreal. It sounds a little alien, for it is known as the place where alienation and images of otherness live. It sounds like trouble; it sounds like something technology has organized. With a few examples drawn from my and others' teaching (and some texts that cluster around the millennium), I want to suggest that the trouble and strangeness we incur in teaching the imaginary as served by the media to mass publics is worth the trouble; that imagining a public or publics for imagination (and thus "public imaginaries") is among the more exigent of reading practices; and that pursuing that practice leads us to read and question some powerful narratives told by the media and those who think critically about them.

The path from the Romantic imagination to the twenty-first century imaginary follows, to a point, the story of modernity. It is a story of the disenchantment of the world and the growth of instrumental reason, of knowledge purchased with the loss of power. Thus far Shelley had come when he wrote, with the confidence of that heroic individualism which spoke easily for all, "We want the creative faculty to imagine that which we know; we want the generous impulse to act that which we imagine . . . The cultivation of those sciences which have enlarged the limits of the empire of man over the external world, has, for want of the poetical faculty, proportionally circumscribed those of the internal world; and man, having enslaved the elements, remains himself a slave."

Shelley believed that "[t]o be greatly good," one "must imagine intensely and comprehensively; he must put himself in the place of another and of many others; the pains and pleasures of his species must become his own." In these latter days, the "want" Shelley spoke of seems more urgent, the knowledge to be imagined greater, and the hugely enlarged sciences of empire more powerful and restrictive, shrinking the space for imagining sympathetically. Envisioning the world through the mass media does not enlarge it, or us. Geoffrey Hartman remarks, "Photographs of the dying, the mutilated, the mute, the devastated are harder to modify than verbally mediated pictures. Utopian visions dim. Snapshots of ordinary or happy life are increasingly like promotional inserts, ads that persuade us to buy life, to go on living. The reign of images, its stark realism, imposes a responsibility that cannot be met, feelings that cannot be acted on."

Meanwhile, driven by global capital, those powerful machines that do our imagining for us seem to shrink distances and flatten out historical depth, substituting copies for the authentic originals of nature and art and replacing those with flatter simulacra, with a map that fuses with the territory—or so the story goes. It is thus that a collective imaginary or imaginaries, social and global, become troubled, and the task of *imagining what we know*, Shelley's project, is compounded by ours: that of *knowing what we and others imagine* in a way both critical and comprehensive.

At the extreme, the story becomes a tale of terror figured in the kind of popular entertainment that Fredric Jameson calls "high-tech paranoia," where computer circuits and their global hookups implement conspiracies complex "beyond the capacity of the normal reading mind." This is the vision foretold in Terry Gilliam's film *Brazil* (1985) and Philip K. Dick's science fiction, realized in the cyberspace of William Gibson's *Neuromancer* trilogy (1984–88), and brought to vivid and immensely profitable currency in the Wachowski brothers' *The Matrix*. That dystopian relic of the last century (1999) and harbinger of this one (two sequels in 2003) perfects the worst imaginings of the postmodern world. Machine intelligence has triumphed, reducing humans to biotic "energy sources" in life-support pods while piping into their minds the collective hallucination of a shared social life. Replicant "agents" scour the world to crush the tiny remnant of humanity that has liberated itself from simulated life, built a "human city, Zion" deep in the magmatic bowels of the earth, and sent out ships in search of a messiah. One of these missions—led by Laurence Fishburne's Morpheus—awakens a cybergeek



***Keanu Reeves hovers amid his own reflections in the film* The Matrix.**

English
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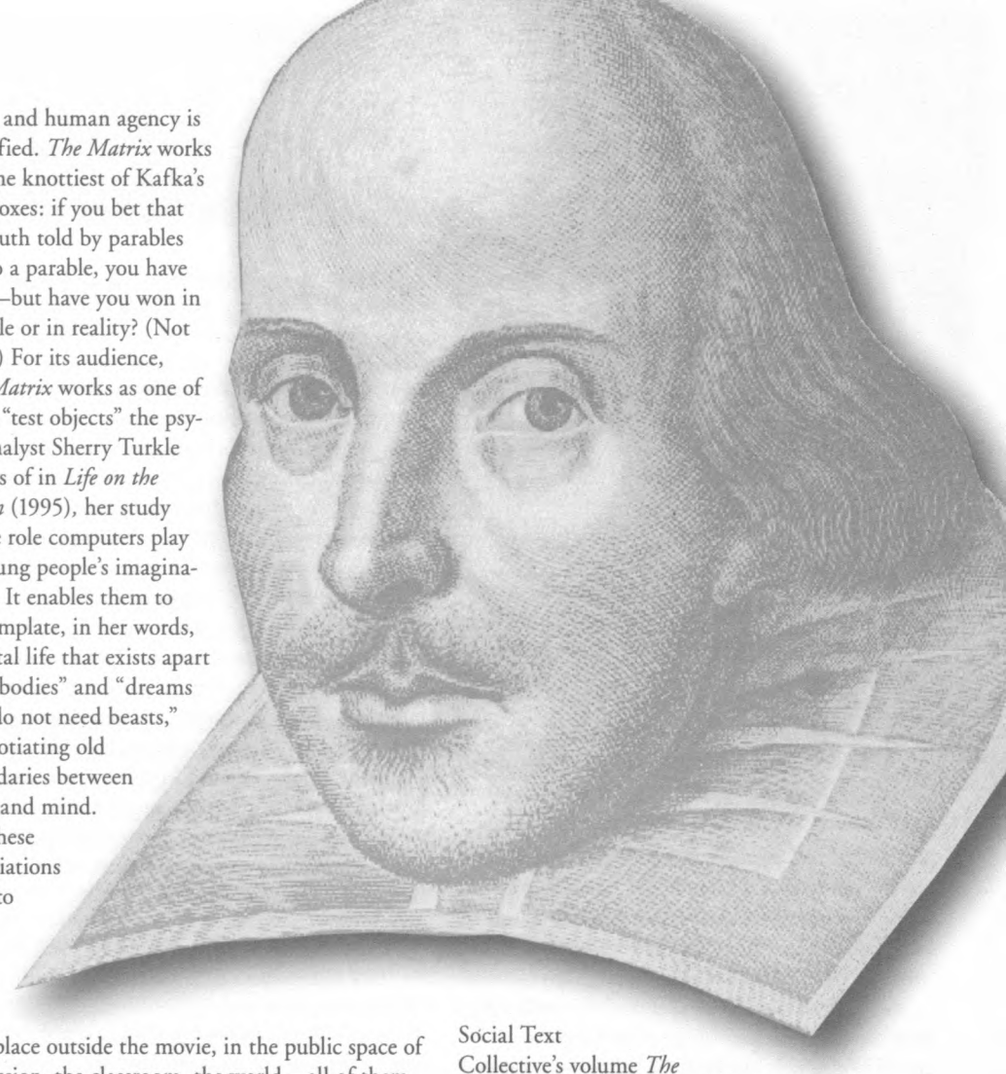
named Neo (Keanu Reeves) from his dream of a life to the tyranny under which he lives. Now Neo is not only a geek and a potential terrorist; he is also a *theorist* who keeps his illicit software in a hollowed-out copy of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacra and Simulation,* so the news that hyperreality has taken over cannot be too much of a surprise. The real surprise is the news that he is "the one," the messiah who will free humanity from the Matrix. The ensuing high-tech adventure—in which he proves himself by the quickness of his wits and the strength of his belief in himself, triumphing in brilliantly balletic kung-fu sequences over hordes of Agent Smiths and the algorithms that breed them—proves the prophecy right, even while the struggle between the Matrix and Zion goes on without resolution through the whole *Matrix* trilogy (oddly reminiscent in its pathos of Shelley's *Revolt of Islam*). The saga at length sends Neo off alone in quest of the machines' home city—seeking a place, after all, for the source of placelessness in the ruined world of a global empire.

Is *The Matrix* readable? Teachable? Abundantly, and not just because it stages the postmodern narrative with such lurid brilliance. People have read it as an allegory of absolutely everything: Christian gnosis, Buddhist enlightenment, the age of the world picture and the death of global space, the Frankfurt school's analysis of the culture industry, and the Lacanian drama of confrontation with the big Other, matrix of symbolization. *The Matrix's* public includes a willing coalition of the half- and the over-educated. It speaks to the selfhood fantasies of adolescent and post-adolescent hackers, male and female, and it teases college teachers with puzzles of agency and epistemology that belong in Philosophy 101, which is where they tend to put it. I have been guilty of a like indulgence, bundling *The Matrix* with Plato and Richard Rorty and a string of dystopias (by Ursula Le Guin, Octavia Butler, Caryl Churchill, and Jorge Luis Borges) in a course called Philosophic Fictions, in which students write about, and in, the forms of literature they read. One assignment here: write your own paranoid dystopia, keyed to Morpheus' revelation to Neo: "It's that feeling you have had all your life . . . that something was wrong with the world; you don't know what it is but it's there, like a splinter in your mind, driving you mad." Or to Borges' odd agenda for his own literature of the irreal: "Let us admit what all idealists admit: the hallucinatory nature of the world. Let us do what no idealist has done: seek unrealities that confirm that nature."

That assignment produced some brilliant fictions, but also much student resistance to *The Matrix's* story about itself, so to speak, and this was good news. What's hard to miss is that in this movie the culture industry gazes into a hyperbolic mirror and falls in love with what it sees: the twin fantasies of total techno-determinism (we made the Matrix and it mastered us) and of extravagant techno-heroism (Neo and his cohort triumph *within* the Matrix; in the real, they only love and suffer). So the omnipotence of technology and the omnipotence of thought fight each other to a draw, and human agency is mystified. *The Matrix* works like the knottiest of Kafka's paradoxes: if you bet that the truth told by parables is also a parable, you have won—but have you won in parable or in reality? (Not both.) For its audience, *The Matrix* works as one of those "test objects" the psychoanalyst Sherry Turkle speaks of in *Life on the Screen* (1995), her study of the role computers play in young people's imaginations. It enables them to contemplate, in her words, "mental life that exists apart from bodies" and "dreams that do not need beasts," renegotiating old boundaries between body and mind. But these negotiations have to take place outside the movie, in the public space of discussion, the classroom, the world—all of them more or less embodied places.



What about these places: are they real? Is publicness a place or sphere, or just a stance from which we deplore the loss of such things? And are selves and bodies in play? I have in mind questions raised by the last decade's renaissance in thinking about the public sphere; I am also thinking of a spread of writing courses originated and taught in our department by faculty and graduate student instructors, courses with titles like Making the News, Media Worlds, International Cinema and Global Politics, Reality TV, The Culture of Television, and Writing in the Electronic Age—courses that go far to give fresh dimensions to publicness in discourse and representation and call into play a practice of reading native and proper, I think, to English departments.

Here the narrative goes back to Jürgen Habermas' enormously influential *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), which presents that domain as something that fell or withered under pressure of consumer society and the media. "The world fashioned by the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only," wrote Habermas. "Radio, film and television by degrees reduce to a minimum the distance that a reader is forced to maintain toward the printed letter . . . They draw the eyes and ears of the public under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distance, place it under 'tutelage,' which is to say they deprive it of the opportunity to say something and to disagree." Public sphere theorists such as those writing in the Social Text Collective's volume *The Phantom Public Sphere* of 1994 challenge these judgments, redeeming the media from such opprobrium and seeking, in the editor's words, to "re-invent the [public sphere] notion . . . as an urban space of aesthetic self-presentation, sociability, theatricality, and pleasure," and of discourse.

Students and teachers in a typical Making the News course of the 2000s study public events and their reportage through powerful resources for research and critique: print and broadcast media; web sites of the major news organizations and a vigorous alternative press; the archives of the online Lexis-Nexis and Dow Jones International services and those of Cornell's Durland Alternatives Library; public and Pacifica radio and TV stations; the ever-swelling Blogosphere and the watchdog organizations FAIR and AIM; Project Censored's annual compilation of spiked stories; and a powerful literature of media-critique from Noam Chomsky to Robert McChesney. Students ask: What is the role of news organizations in a democracy? How has the growing concentration of US media affected news content and form? What are the poetics of newswriting and newscasting, and how do they account for sameness and discontinuity of coverage? What is an event, and what is a celebrity in the society of the spectacle? How do TV news programs shape and stage raced, gendered, and class-marked bodies? They may ask: What kind of forum has the Internet become in its short evolution from a "virtual community" and a "Cyberkeley" to a half-corporate "Cyberia" that gazettes its citizens with a "Daily We"? And they

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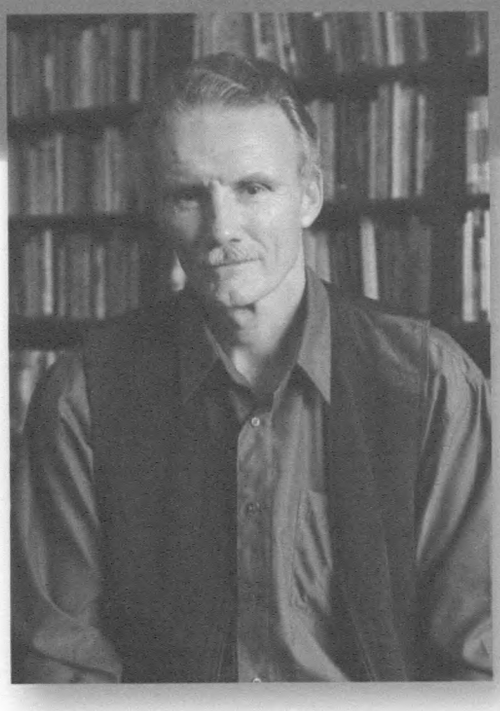
Creative Writing in the Twenty-First Century Academy



by Lamar Herrin

***Lamar Herrin**, professor of English at Cornell and past director of the Creative Writing Program, is author of a number of short stories and five novels, including* The Lies Boys Tell. *His latest novel,* The House of the Deaf *(Unbridled Press, 2005) concerns an American's trip to Spain to attempt to understand the death of his daughter in an act of Basque terrorism. (The title refers to the house where Goya painted his grim, late masterpieces on the walls.)* Romancing Spain, *a memoir of his courtship of his wife Amparo Herrin, is forthcoming in 2006 from the same press. In this essay, Lamar looks back to the founding of the MFA program at Cornell in order to reconsider the position of creative writers in an institution dominated by scholarship and to suggest new, surprising ways for writers and scholars to learn from each other.*

The first week of my first semester at Cornell—the fall of 1977—Archie Ammons called a meeting of the creative writing faculty to propose disbanding the program. I'm almost certain he called a similar meeting in the fall of 1978. At the time I didn't know the mischievous, puckish side of A.R. Ammons. I knew some of his poetry and loved the way it stimulated my mind and my senses and left me with a clearer, keener head than I'd started off with. I knew he had a sense of humor. But when Archie explained to us (and the group included such veterans as Jim McConkey and Walter Slatoff) that the second you institutionalize creative writing you kill it, I was unprepared for the cogency and high-seriousness of his argument. Good writing will always be subversive, will always serve as an instrument of dissent. Its mission is to rattle the status quo to its foundations. When the status quo is your employer, you find yourself in a moral bind, and the only thing to do then is sever the ties.

It's been 28 years, but I don't recall anyone outarguing Archie on that occasion. I remember the consensus being that Archie was right—of course, he was right—but there was . . . well . . . this minor matter of a job.

And I seem to see Archie grinning at that moment. He'd just wanted to go on record. Of course, we needed to eat.

According to Morris Bishop in his history of Cornell, creative writing classes were given here as early as 1904, and when Martin Wright Simpson was named chair of the English department in 1909, creative writing became a staple. It's just possible, Bishop suggests, that Cornell was the first American university to offer classes in the writing of fiction and poetry. Shortly after World War II, Baxter Hathaway, a novelist and Renaissance scholar, was lured here from the University of Michigan to create a creative writing program in earnest. *Epoch* magazine, the longest-running literary quarterly in the country (and now under the masterful direction of Michael Koch), began in 1947. The MFA program graduated its first students in the mid-sixties. Baxter had no trouble envisioning MFAs as writer-scholars and designed the curriculum accordingly.

Ezra Cornell had a vision, too. At his university, learning would be applied. A bridge seen in the mind's eye would lead irresistibly to the pounding of rivets. Agro-theorists could and should stroll over to the Cornell orchards (and we remember that of the Ivy League universities only Cornell has a school of agriculture) and get their hands on an apple. Literature studied at an intellectual remove should be paired off with the messiness of literature in the making.

Yet, there's Archie's objection. You institutionalize it, you kill it. It's the worst sort of betrayal—you wither it at the root.

I once saw an interview on television with the Nobel Prize-winning novelist Saul Bellow. Bellow was asked why he'd majored in anthropology instead of literature in college, and I remember the exact wording of his reply. He said he didn't need "a priestly intermediary" between himself and the book he was reading. Bellow seemed to be taking Archie one step further: not only should creative writing not be taught in universities but literature shouldn't either (at least not in a "priestly" manner). Writers want nothing between themselves and the work they're writing—no theories, no religious, political, or ideological strictures—and they want their readers to experience the primacy of the work's full impact, too.

So while we're disbanding creative writing programs, do we disband English departments as well?

There's a little anarchist in me that says, Hell, yes, disband everything. To that little anarchist I answer, Sure, but there's this matter of a job. My anarchist—the worst sort of purist—will tell me to go live off the land.

So what to do?

Quoting from "Twenty-First Century Humanities at the Core of the University": "Great research universities must not only produce knowledge but explore the meanings, ramifications, and dissemination of that knowledge."

The problem here is "knowledge." With the exception of publication and performance dates and a few biographical data, literature, as I understand it, has nothing to do with knowledge. And the second you cull from its pages details, information, tendencies, patterns, even "paradigms," and present them as knowledge, you have misrepresented the enterprise in the most fundamental way. I'd almost risk saying that literature is that form of writing that remains mercurial enough to elude epistemological classification to the very end. Its greatness might be equated to its elusiveness, or its inexhaustibility, and if it does give up and give in I think we can safely say we're dealing with something less than greatness.

If we can't present literature as knowledge (to students eager to copy down the authoritative word), then how can we present it? Probably no way that would satisfy Saul Bellow, and not Archie either, who wouldn't want Prometheus, in any of his guises, bound. For lack of a better word I'd say we can present it as "experience," as long as our students understand there's no such thing as a definitive one, that in each reading and each presentation our experience of literature will undoubtedly change. We should insist on the dynamics of reading; our sense of a poem, story, novel, or play (never a "text") might become more and more refined, but never conclusive, never closed down for good. There's life on that page, there's a special sort of combustion, in the face of which we as professors are trying to find the honorable right words.

William Gass says: "Great art shames us with its superior reality."

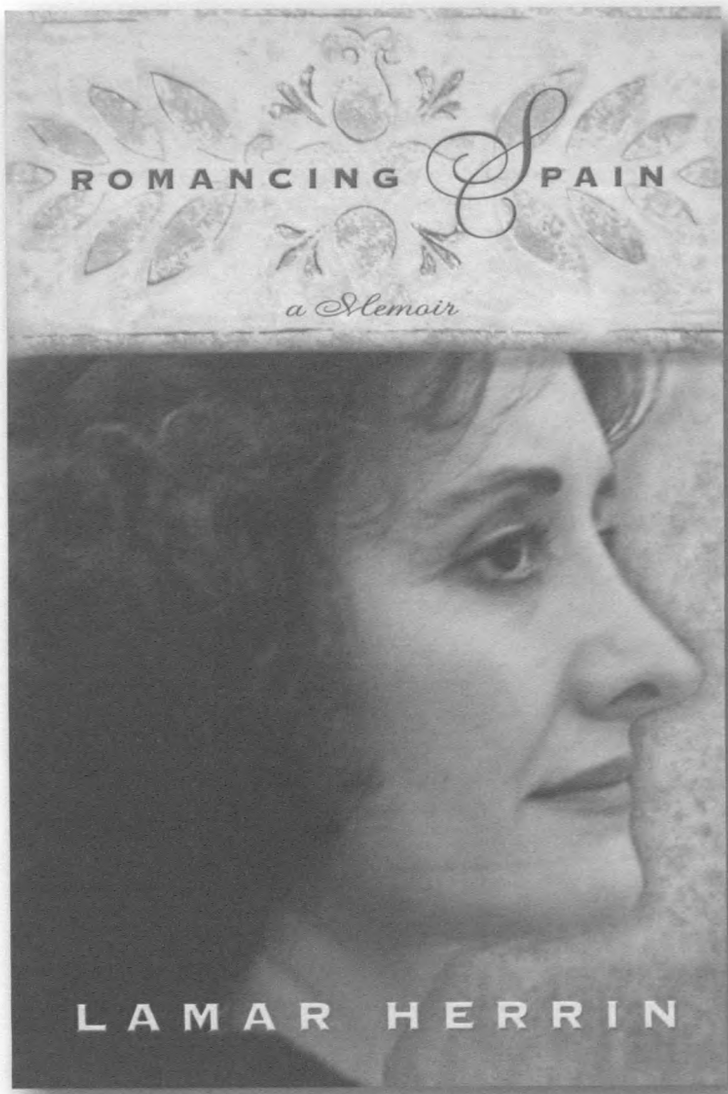
I wouldn't say "shames." But it does sharpen our senses and stimulate our minds and give us an experience we should be humbly grateful for.

Does creative writing belong in the university? (I understand that this question could be asked about any of the arts.) Does creative writing belong in English departments? Can an English department and a creative writing program cohabit to everyone's satisfaction (as if there ever were such a thing as an utterly satisfying cohabitation)? At Cornell we are housed at very close quarters. We occupy the same hall. The *Epoch* office, hub of the creative writing program, faces the department offices. Unlike any other university in the country (as far as I've been able to determine), we have a joint degree program that, administratively, at least, allows graduate students to be creative writers and scholars at the same time (Baxter Hathaway would be pleased). To ask the question that's occasioned

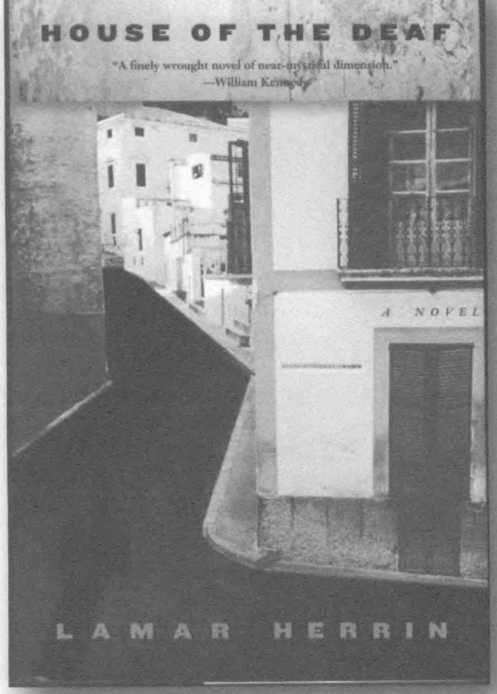
this newsletter: can creative writing and the scholarly study of literature make common cause and point the humanities into the twenty-first century?

I believe that they can. In fact, I believe they've got a head start. Fifteen to 17 years ago the creative writing program at Cornell had less credibility within the department and the college than it has now, and there was little in the way of interaction between students from the two disciplines. MFA students were not exactly welcome in certain graduate classes, and PhD candidates almost never found their way into literature classes given by creative writing faculty. That has changed. PhD candidates are becoming interested in what poets and fiction writers have to say, and a number of members of the graduate faculty have gone out of their way to design courses with an eye toward attracting creative writers. I don't think this corresponds to some charitable impulse on the graduate faculty's part; I think (in part, because I've been told) that creative writing students bring a passionate response to the work in question that is salutary and balance-restoring and gives a clearer sense of what the words "primary" and "secondary" mean. I know I run the risk of a terrible over-simplification here, and a cliche. There sit the scholars, dutifully working through their bibliographies, poring over articles and books about books about books; there go the creative writers, exulting exclamatorily over the primacy of the word. But creative writers tend to take everything personally, and reading, when it strikes the right chord, constitutes a discovery that will inevitably lead them back to their own work. Scholars (and I'm not one, but I suppose) cultivate a sort of double vision that allows them to single out a work's most relevant detail and place it in its most meaningful context—or the context in question. The creative writer can profit from the scholar's sophistication and broad view, and the scholar needs to see and feel (in his bones) that some works of literature will not allow themselves to be disengaged from so easily. In the spirit of the agro-theorist paying a visit to the Cornell orchards, the English department needs to encourage more of this cross-fertilization. It won't be restful (fertilization never is), but it will yield a better fruit.

This is pretty obvious. And I come at it from a novelist's point of view. But to varying degrees I've lived in both camps during my years at Cornell and believe in what I say. The creative arts will shake and unsettle and even try to bring down the walls of an institution, but if they belong in a university it's because of the fructifying role they can play. In return, the creative arts can get clarity, some inroads on wisdom, a longer, broader, more historical view.



As faculty we need to collaborate more. Creative writers need to attend more critical conferences and colloquia, and perhaps play a role (the three-day *Quixote* colloquium, run last semester by the Romance Studies Department, brought creative writers and scholars to campus in equal number and was a great success). And scholars need to attend our readings (and urge their students to do the same), confident that the writers we invite here will be worth their time. Indeed, if year in and year out we could depend on sufficient funding to invite writers worthy of our department and program (the *only* recommendation the recent external review



made to improve creative writing at Cornell), I see no reason why PhD and MFA candidates couldn't meet on a regular basis to discuss the writers they've heard; why papers couldn't be written and, perhaps, credits awarded. In 1976 an elite group of writers gathered at Cornell to celebrate the work of Anton Chekhov and acknowledge their indebtedness to his craft. Some of those writers read from their own fiction. They included Eudora Welty, John Cheever, and Walker Percy. What graduate student—scholar or poet—wouldn't leap at the chance to hear those writers read and talk about their work? Winters get long and dark in Ithaca, but once we got this cross-fertilization going, there's no telling how fast we could brighten things up with a little imagination and the necessary resources. Why not team-teach classes, alternating the broadly cultural with the writer's up-close attention to the word? (I don't want to insist too much on this dichotomy.) Since Jim McConkey's Mind and Memory course shut down, nothing, to my knowledge, has come along to replace it. Artists from various departments can get together and offer events, and under the auspices of the Council for the Arts we frequently do, but what I'm talking about here is the creative writers and the scholars from our department speaking with one voice, in a language both sides can understand.

(I might add, as footnote, that the risk run in such a close collaboration might be greater for the creative writers than the scholars, for the MFAs than the PhDs. Creative writers who find themselves writing to satisfy the tenets of some seductive literary theory will almost certainly produce writing that is dead on the page. Scholars made privy to the secrets of creative composition might suffer a seizure of disbelief that such intelligent, grown people can allow themselves to be governed by the intuitions of a child.)

The Cornell Council for the Arts has proposed creating a center for the arts—an actual building, comparable, perhaps, to what the Society for the Humanities has—where exhibitions can take place, films can be shown, readings held, etc. I'm all for

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Poetry and the Common Sense

by Rayna Kalas

***Rayna Kalas**, who came to Cornell in 2003 as an assistant professor, specializes in the English Renaissance. Her first book,* Frame, Glass, Verse: The Technology of Poetic Invention in the English Renaissance, *which is now under consideration for publication, argues that for Renaissance writers, poetry was not so much an aesthetic but a technology in the etymological sense of* techne, *or the conjoining of manual skill and creative invention. Her new project, titled* Tragicomedy and the Bonds of Service in Early Modern English Writing, *looks at how tragicomedy redefined the "service" of the writer in relation to other newly mobile forms of labor. In her essay, she takes up the social relevance of studying the literary tradition. Can older literary and philosophical traditions speak pertinently to the moral and social conditions of the twenty-first century? Can one engage with politics without entering into "politicizing" polemics? Can one ignore political questions without turning the study of literature into a hermetic, class-bound privilege? Rayna explores these and other issues by a reading of Sir Thomas More's* Utopia *and arrives at some unexpected answers.*

When I was asked to contribute an essay on the topic of the humanities in the twenty-first century for the department newsletter, my immediate thought was that I *should* do it. As an assistant professor of English, I should be able to articulate the purpose of my work as a teacher and researcher in the humanities. Having a statement about what English faculty do seems especially important right now, when for many people the study of literature is, at best, a luxury and, at worst, a soft cover for the peddling of political ideology. So I accepted the assignment, promising to write something about the social value of the study of poetics.

But as I began to plot out what I might write, I felt a gathering sense of dread. I should *not* have agreed to do this, least of all to have offered to speak of social value and poetics in the same breath. It is a minefield (or as I used to hear it as a child, thanks to faulty hearing, a mindfield). Step to the left a little bit and you are likely set off a harangue against scholars who presume to speak of real worlds rather than just golden ones: "English professors don't teach literature anymore" is the charge. Step back to the right, and you may trigger an entirely different firestorm, this time directed at those who do profess literature, and whose attention to literary form is deemed arcane or obsolete, which is to say, out of step with reality. To address both allegations would require an elaborated explanation of how figurative language is always actively engaged in social realities and processes; and yet the terrain seems to inhibit disclosures of that kind.

Some of these allegations about literary study being too worldly, or not worldly enough, come from outside the university, but the same basic argument is waged within academic circles. Among English faculty, there are those who caution that the category of literature and traditional approaches to the study of literature are not as neutral as they might appear, but are in fact predicated upon social, cultural, and aesthetic hierarchies whose exclusions should, at the very least, be made known, if not included among the objects of our study. On the other side, there are those who worry that, by expanding the objects of our study to virtually any aspect of culture, literary critics may be forfeiting our stewardship of a discipline that engenders its unique form of knowledge and practice not simply through its mastery of the arts of rhetoric, but also through its understanding of figurative language. Should our goal, as teachers and researchers, be to democratize our own intellectual practice and to make any aspect of culture available for any person's analysis, even if it means that what we would then hold in common is a notion of "reading" that is synonymous with critique? Should our goal be instead to preserve our guardianship over a more rarefied form of "reading," even if it means that, in doing so, we perpetuate the nostalgia for a universal humanism, and a unity of cultural values, that never really existed?

Before we can answer these questions, before we can even determine whether or not these are the questions to be asked in thinking about the future of literary study in the humanities, it seems worth noting just how deeply embedded those questions are in the history of humanism. What these questions are really agonizing over—the relationship between the common good and personal privilege, and between common sense and uncommon understanding—is as old as humanism itself. By way of illustration, but also as a reminder that humanism is almost never as tidy or triumphalist as later categorizations of it have suggested, I offer a passage from Ralph Robynson's 1556 English translation of Thomas More's *Utopia*. The passage is taken from the very last paragraph of the book, where the character, More, having listened to Raphael Hythloday's account of Utopian society, demurs that the "manner and laws of that people seemed to be instituted and founded of no good reason." The one thing that "More" just cannot let go of, the one bit of common sense or "good reason" that he just cannot shake, is his belief in private property; and the passage gently mocks him for it. He finds fault with the Utopians "not only in the fashion of their chivalry, and in their sacrifices and religions and in other of their laws, *but also, yea and chiefly, in that which is the principal foundation of all their ordinances, that is to say in the community of their life and living, without any occupying of money* by the which thing only all nobility, magnificence, worship, honor, and majesty, *the true ornaments and honors, as the common opinion is, of a commonwealth, utterly be overthrown and destroyed*" [emphasis added]. (1) The implication here is that "More" just does not get it. As for Raphael, he too is guilty of obduracy (including an unwillingness to accommodate dissent). And in the end, very little seems resolved. *Utopia* establishes an impasse between the "occupying of money" and a "community of life and living," between common sense and uncommon experience, and between true wisdom and wise praxis. Yet what makes the book so interesting and so troubling is that these oppositions rarely line up in any predictable way or along any single axis. I suspect that More, the author, was making fun of a contradiction that lies at the very heart of humanism: its vaunted purpose of serving both the private interest and the public good.

More may have had good reason to poke fun at a certain form of humanism. In *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy,* Jacob Burckhardt explains that by the sixteenth century, the first wave of Italian humanism had fallen into disrepute. After a brilliant succession of poet-scholars had, since the beginning of the fourteenth century, filled Italy and the world with the worship of antiquity, had determined the forms of education and culture, had often taken the lead in political affairs and had, to no small extent, reproduced ancient literature—at length in the sixteenth century, before their doctrines and scholarship had lost hold of the public mind, the whole class fell into a deep and general disgrace. Though they still served as models to the poets, historians, and orators, personally no one would consent to be one of their number. To the two chief accusations against them—that of malicious self-conceit, and that of abominable profligacy—a third charge of irreligion was now loudly added by the rising powers of the Counter-Reformation. (2)

For Burckhardt, the advent of printing was, in part, responsible for this fall. The dissemination of the printed text obviated the need for "personal intercourse with the humanists": scholars were no longer "personally the possessors and diffusers of ancient culture." But the humanists themselves were also, in part, to blame. "The first to make these charges were certainly the humanists themselves. Of all men who ever formed a class, they had the least sense of their common interest, and

least respected what there was of this sense." In Burckhardt's account, the fall of humanism, or at least the evacuation of its public role, is a story of "unbridled subjectivity." (3)

Of course, humanism also survived this fall, in Northern humanism, to be sure, but also in humanism as an educational practice. When we speak of humanism today, we are principally speaking about the legacy of the latter: about an institutionalized rhetoric rather than the playfully irreverent figurative language of writers like Rabelais, Erasmus, and More. But these writers who were satirizing humanism were also seeking, in their own ways, to preserve it. *Utopia* first appeared in print as it was originally written: in a punning, erudite form of Latin prose. Thus it preserved an elite language of learning, even as it engaged in the dispersal of that discourse. *Utopia* represents in print a conversational exchange among a group of humanists who were Thomas More's actual contemporaries, and yet included among their number is the fictional character, Raphael Hythloday. Though his last name essentially means "distributor of nonsense," it is Raphael who offers the most incisive critique of English society. *Utopia* is a book that both satirizes humanism and perpetuates it.

Utopia satirizes not only the players, but the principles of humanism. With its dual purpose of serving both private interests and the public concern, humanistic reason will always be circumscribed by the social organization. The result, as *Utopia* so scathingly points out, is that wisdom itself has taken the shape of private ownership. "More's" very notion of what is "true" observes the social logic of property. He withholds his disagreements, he admits, because Raphael has admonished that the desire to appear wise is itself a proprietary assertion: "I knew he was weary of talking, and was not sure whether he could abide that anything should be said against his mind, specially because I remembered that he had reprehended this fault in other, which be afeard lest they should seem not to be wise enough unless they could find fault in other men's inventions." For "More," wisdom itself is an "ornament and honor": he cannot conceive of wisdom apart from private property. Of course, Raphael himself finds fault with fault finders; even in positioning himself against the private ownership of property, he seems to find himself circumscribed by its logic. Raphael and the character More both have critiques, Raphael of English society, "More" of Utopian society; they both find fault, assert wisdom. The book even seems to solicit the fault-finding and proprietary wisdom of an uncommon reader by placing "More" and Raphael, England and Utopia, side by side, and by making them so available for comparison and judgment.

Bildarchiv Preussischer Kulturbesitz/ Art Resource, NY

The map from the edition of* Utopia *with Hans Holbein's famous portrait of Sir Thomas More.

Humanistic reason may urge its subjects to compare and judge, but humanistic *reading* seems to engender another kind of understanding entirely. It is the figurative language of this work—etymological puns, quibbles, riddles, repetitions—that makes it possible to learn and observe the relationship between wisdom and property without picking sides, assuming a position, or asserting, as a reader-critic, the proprietary identity of a fixed opinion. It is figurative language in this work that makes possible, not unbridled assertions of wisdom, but understanding. Figurative language, we might say, creates a common understanding out of uncommon sense. No matter how clever the reader, understanding stems not from reason or opinion but from the commonly held medium of language.

I want to be emphatic on this point: I am not suggesting that we should all feel obliged to go back and revel in the beautiful ambiguities of Thomas More's writing (even though I do think they are amazing). For one thing, More has been canonized in more ways than one already, and his writing hardly needs any further promotion from me. For another, ambiguity is not the be-all and end-all of every true understanding, or even of every literary text. There are all kinds of issues, inside and outside of the classroom, on which a faculty member or a student, like any citizen, must take a clear and unequivocal stand. But I do not think the argument needs to be made that the humanities disciplines have been essential in providing us with

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Letter from the Chair

Laura Brown, the John Wendell Anderson Professor of English, served for three years as chair of the English Department.

As I end my three-year term as chair of the Cornell English Department, I'm especially aware of the changes that have taken place during this time and the many lessons I have learned. Those of you who have kept up with events in the department over the last three years know that we have added a very impressive group of new faculty members in a time of active hiring and recruitment, that we have passed very successfully through our first full-scale external review with renewed energy for long-term planning, and that we have graduated an unusually large number of English majors—a cohort of nearly 150 majors in 2004–05.

I am especially conscious of a change and a lesson that have taken hold of my own thinking about the discipline of literary studies in the last three years. In 2002–03, as we prepared for our external review, the faculty in the department worked hard to define, field by field, a set of priorities designed to carry us forward into the next five years, and that included ideas about the future of each field; about hiring priorities within individual fields and for the department as a whole; and about our relationship with peer institutions in terms of programs and structures that could support the strongest and most significant work in literary study.

I learned during this process that in every area within the department, faculty felt that the discipline was shifting or about to shift under our feet, and that we were eager to participate and to take the lead in changes that we felt to be on the horizon of literary studies. An exciting lesson, but complicated—as changes always are—by its own open-ended premise. If literary studies, or the humanities generally, are just at the point of significant innovation, how do we position ourselves to engage with or even to grasp those changes?

In reflecting on our own work as teachers and critics of literature, the faculty in the English Department has thought deeply about where we stand today, and each of us has been involved in raising questions and proposing ideas designed to further our thinking about the future.

How do we balance traditional topics, texts, and authors with approaches informed by critical theory, gender and sexuality studies, cultural studies, or post-colonial scholarship? How do we respond in our teaching to globalization and popular culture, to film and digital media? How do we approach the structure of our discipline in light of the growing engagement with interdisciplinary approaches? How do we justify the study of earlier historical periods in a time of growing commitment to the immediate, the contemporary, or even the future?

How do we define "American" literatures when geographical borders, national identities, and ethnic cultures fail to match up under that rubric? And how do we define the very discipline that we practice—the critical study of English literature—when the understanding of both "English" and of "literature" are under revision?

Alongside these questions, we have proposed changes that might move us forward into the future. In the earlier periods of British literature, we are interested in bridging traditional boundaries, both historical and geographical—in connecting medieval and Renaissance literature for instance, as well as British and American. In Shakespeare studies, we have sought in our courses offerings to provide a perspective on the lively proliferation of Shakespearean materials in world literature and popular culture today, and to understand the prominence of Shakespeare in the very definition of Anglophone literary criticism.

In American studies, we have been seeking ways of articulating canonical American literature and ethnic American literature, with the long-term goal of building an upper-division curriculum in advanced and comparative ethnic studies. We have considered a range of cross-cultural or comparative teaching scenarios, including an omnibus course on comparative colonialisms from the Caribbean to India, Africa, and the Pacific, and including the Holocaust. And within the Creative Writing Program, we have increasingly attracted an ethnically diverse group of innovative writers, whose fiction and poetry have changed the nature and subject of writing at Cornell and beyond. These changes would require new ways of thinking about teaching, hiring, and program building, and we have begun to look for support for collaborative teaching, and cooperative searches.

More broadly, however, we are interested now in applying the lessons we have learned about our discipline to the humanities in general. Like literary criticism, the humanities is shifting, changing, and inviting its students and critics to give it a new face, for the university and for society at large. Along with the Society for the Humanities at Cornell, and a range of other departments and faculty members within the humanities, we are beginning to develop a set of questions that can carry us forward. What is the relationship within the humanities between the creative or performing arts and the critical and scholarly projects that take these arts as their subject? Can we promote innovation in teaching, research, or writing, as well as programmatic alliances, that might stimulate this relationship in new ways?

What is the role of the social sciences in the future of the humanities? Could research in the quantitative social sciences be connected with cultural criticism to produce new kinds of knowledge? Could science find a common cause with the humanities, perhaps in the new fields of computational science, digitalization, or sustainability? How can we change the structure of the university in order to open up the possibility for new work along these lines? And how can we ensure that our freshest, riskiest, and most surprising thinking reaches our students and our research agendas?

My final lesson, as chair, entailed a glimpse of the immense momentum of a discipline in transition. Can one of us, even the most brilliant, bend its course or even grasp its direction? Probably not. But all of us give it its future. The greatest pleasures and responsibilities of intellectual work lie between that impulse to make new knowledge and that assurance that we do so together.

Laura Brown

Laura Brown

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ask: If the public sphere is a phantom agora or a marketplace of phantasms, where does the news *take place?*

Did the First Gulf War, for example, "take place"? (Baudrillard says it didn't, perhaps without having consulted the Kuwaitis.) And what about the War on Terror, and the War in Iraq? In a Making the News section I taught in the fall of 2002, the "place" of these events was on, and in, our minds while the war in Afghanistan was proceeding and the drumbeat for regime change in Iraq rising. Class members tracked many events through many media, writing copiously on a host of subjects: the ability of Chomsky's "propaganda model" to explain coverage of airlifts to Afghans or of the Rwanda genocide; the role of the press in the drive for graduate student unionization at Cornell; stories of Watergate in the press and the film *All the President's Men*; the reporting of economics in the Clintonocracy and the history of missile defense under Bush II. What stands out in my memory is, well, the experience of reading—reading hard, in good company and in a patchwork of local and global spaces and a richly layered mediascape. The tone was set by a first assignment, Elaine Scarry's "Watching and Authorizing the Gulf War." In that 1993 article, she traces the waning of public debate in government and the media over recent wars and the dominance of spectacle in the 1990–91 war. Her centerpiece is a reading of a McDonnell Douglas ad appearing in *The Economist* right after the war. A lean and phallic F/A-18 Hornet, made by the advertiser and laden with microcephalic missiles, spans the page and cleaves a text that celebrates the product and its record in Operation Desert Storm: "You're Carrying Four Tons of Explosives and People Are Shooting at You. No Problem," says the text. Says Scarry, "the advertisement enlists the reader into an act of self-recognition," for both the plane and the *Economist* readership are "proven performers," "dependable" and "fearsome"; and a virtual public is invited on triumphal procession to and from the Gulf.

Invited, but not compelled—for of course the reader of the reader here, Scarry, performs another act of self-recognition, making her able (in Habermas' terms) to "say something and disagree." So does the reader of Kevin Carter's Pulitzer-winning photo of a vulture and a dying African child in *The Times* of 1993, read in connection with Susan Sontag's *Regarding the Pain of Others.* So too the reader of the Confederate flag in American politics of the last half century, who in this case happens to be Adam Sasiadek (ILR '06), a student in Media Worlds with Angela Naimou and author of the essay that won the Knight Institute's Expository Writing Prize last spring. Michael Warner has something to say about such acts of reading in his *Publics and Counterpublics* (2002): "When we understand images and texts as public, we make a necessary imaginary reference to the public *as opposed to* other individuals . . . To ask about the relation between democracy and the rhetorical forms of publicity, we would have to consider how the public dimension of discourse can come about differently in different contexts of mediation, from official to mass cultural or subcultural. There is not simply 'a' public discourse and a 'we' who apprehend it." To me and, I think, to Warner, this means that the publicness of imagery and discourse holds a kernel of imaginative force—is plural, mutable, negotiable, and performable, subject to the aesthetic and ethical intervention of an active audience. That is the audience we are when we teach and read and view, and the audience student writers need in order to experience their own work as real. Critical *distance* is restored to the experience of public mediation, the distance lost in Habermas' narrative of transformation as well as Baudrillard's story of the supersaturated realm of simulations. The resulting public imaginary is nuanced, contestatory, and fragmented, open to investigation—and far-flung.

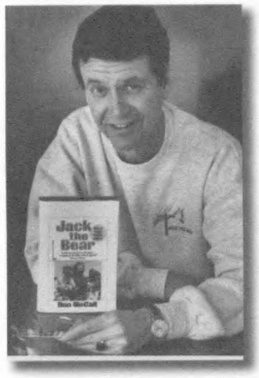
How far-flung? I want to look at a text taught in Media Worlds and Global Cinema by teachers who know more about the world than I, Naimou, and our colleague Nick Davis. It is Alain Brigand's film *11'09"01*, an anthology of cinematic responses to the WTC attacks of September 11 by directors from eleven countries, each segment eleven minutes, nine seconds and one frame long. Made in 2002, it contests mass-produced public commemorations of the attacks. It doesn't just imagine publics; it shows multiple publics across the world trying to imagine that catastrophe—or imagining other catastrophes that rival or recall it. A teacher of Afghan children in Iran seeks to explain the attacks to them and helps them understand it only by pointing to a high chimney that may (for us) recall Auschwitz; she has summoned them to school from brick-making with a warning of future retaliation: "You can't stop bombs with bricks; come to class." A refugee Bosnian woman defers, then persists in her group's public commemoration of the murder of Muslim men in Srebrenica on July 11, 1995; "after this," she muses (perhaps about 9-11, perhaps about 7-11), "we can expect anything." A Chilean exile in London writes a letter to Americans recalling yet another 11th, date of the U.S.-sponsored coup against the Allende government on September 11, 1973, with copious news footage of the earlier event. He is not evening scores but measuring the later tragedy against the prior. In New York, a Muslim disappears, and his family are hounded by police and reporters who suspect him of complicity—to learn at length that he has died as an emergency medical technician in the attacks. In Burkina Faso, poor children glimpse and stalk a man they think is Osama bin Laden, expecting to win the large price on his head; they are inconsolable when he slips away on a plane. In New York once more, a French tour guide leaves his deaf-mute girlfriend to go to work, and she writes him a dear-John on the computer while the unobserved TV screen repeats and repeats the attacks; he may be dead, and his return in ashen form does not settle the question. In a nowhere of horror, the Mexican director blacks out all but the jumping civilians, running his film for long minutes against a sound-track of muttered prayers and cell-phone calls from another of the doomed jets and asking "Does God's light guide us or blind us?"

Where does all this take place, and for whom? Not in Utopia, but not in *The Matrix* either. Perhaps in the flows of "ethnoscapes," "mediascapes," and "ideoscapes" mapped in Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996), an indispensable handbook for imagining in the twenty-first century. Almost everyone in *11'09"01* is a migrant or a nomad or someone who harbors them, a citizen of the "diasporic public spheres" of the world Appadurai charts in his study of "the imagination as a social practice." Their reactions to the WTC attacks speak volumes about the way they imagine themselves in the world. In just such a mixed, fragmented, and electronically mediated world, writes Appadurai, the imagination is a more and not less singular agency—the medium of terror and pastiche, coercion, and community, "the key component of the new global order." This book reads as though Salman Rushdie, who knows something about diasporas and terror, were to write political geography. "The broken mirror may actually be as valuable as the one which is supposedly unflawed," wrote Rushdie in his *Imaginary Homelands* (1981). Today, Appadurai would almost certainly view the mirror's brokenness—refractive, sharp-edged, kaleidoscopic, instinct with depth—as a source of the light it can shed on the new century.

DVD cover for 11'09"01, an anthology of short films from around the world that respond to the tragedy of the September 11 attacks.

A version of this essay with references and acknowledgments is online at http://instruct1.cit.cornell.edu/~sad4/imag/

Faculty Retiring



Some 46 years ago, **Dan McCall** popped up in a writing course I taught during the Harvard summer session. In a class that cut across all stratifications of age, Dan, at nineteen, clearly stood out as recruit, the raw youth, the class pet. At our final meeting, Dan read a hilarious passage about his palmy days as a teen-age quiz kid. The performance provoked an ovation—in my fifty-odd years as teacher the only such happening. Then, at a recent farewell reading, Dan treated his fans, whose names are legion, to a retrieval of—well, his days as a quiz-kid. So Dan's professional career, like his Harvard debut, ended on an up-note.

Well: Dan has written a lot of books since August 1959—and since his arrival at Cornell via Stanford and Columbia in 1966. His most popular novel to date remains *Jack the Bear*, a funny, beautifully "felt" narrative about the adolescent whiz in an Oakland-based dysfunctional family, which has been translated into more languages than *Mein Kampf*, *Jurassic Park*, and *The Devil Wears Prada*; it's appeared under a hodgepodge of zany titles and spooked his translators. (Among the hygienic Danes, Jack throws his dirty wash not into a laundry chute but an incinerator). *Jack* has been followed by a dozen novels, a number of them reflecting Dan's specialty as Americanist, notably *Beecher*, a concisely exhaustive novel about the trial of Henry Ward Beecher, and arguably his finest book, *Messenger Bird*, which records the trials of a doctor on a Native American reservation. Dan is a master at exploring professional specifics: I recall a student of ours, the daughter of a cardiologist and herself by now a top-notch fictionist, leafing through *Messenger Bird* and wondering out loud, "How does he *know* all that?"

At that, Dan the fictioneer often peeks out of his impish and irreverent academic homework on *Bartleby*, on Hawthorne and James—his earliest, *The Example of Richard Wright*, made the *Times* list of ten best non-fiction books, and the latest, his edition of Melville's "Killer Bs" (Billy, Benito, Bartleby), went into ten printings in two years. And a lecturer who crams no less than 200 students into Hollis Cornell to hear his glosses on *A Farewell to Arms* and *American Pastoral* must have something going for him.

Sorry: "no fewer than." Dan's purism has been the bane, the in-joke of his undergrads. His pen pounces on every maladjusted comma, every windy phrase. In fact, every "in fact" goes into the trashcan—or incinerator. Anybody who splits an infinitive is fit to split an atom. Obviously Dan's anathemas on ascending colons don't begin to reflect his pedagogy. His generosity to his students beggars description. In last year's *Newsletter* Roger Gilbert cited the graduates of the writing program who have famously made it. Unsurprisingly each has been a disciple of Dan's. Dan's retirement is in fact purely *pro forma*. Where lesser emeriti collect begging letters by long-lost alumni, Dan stockpiles Brobdingnagian manuscripts by students he taught ages ago, and fine-tunes them with the same solicitude that he lavishes on the stories of his latest clients. Who, in turn, will foist their wares on him twenty years hence. In person, in Dan's living room.

But before they do, comma, I'd better get Dan to proofread all this.

—Edgar Rosenberg

Winthrop (Pete) Wetherbee retired last fall after 37 years at Cornell University. A native of Boston, he earned a BA from Harvard, an MA from the University of Leeds, and a PhD from Berkeley in 1967, the year he joined the Cornell faculty as an assistant professor of medieval literature. He was granted early tenure after completing *Platonism and Poetry in the Twelfth Century*, a study of the medieval school of Chartres, which he soon followed with a brilliant edition of the *Cosmographia* of Bernardus Sylvestris, a member of the school. He is also the author of numerous essays on medieval French, Latin, Italian, Early English, and other literatures. His *Chaucer and the Poets: An Essay on "Troilus and Criseyde"* (1984) studies the poetic relationship between Chaucer and his forebears—Dante, Virgil, Petrarch, Statius. At Cornell he directed the Medieval Studies Program and chaired the Department of Comparative Literature and, from 1990 until 1996, the Department of English. In 1989, he was named Avalon Foundation Professor in the Humanities.

The range of Pete's scholarly loves have made him an ideal teacher and mentor of young medievalists as well as a generous help to any graduates and undergraduates interested in studying outside their fields. A grad student in the Renaissance recalls working with Pete on her Latin while a friend in the program worked with him on Italian. That year Pete was also learning Biblical Hebrew while spending mornings brushing up on his French (by reading Proust). Of his many interests, none exceeds his passion for the modern jazz masters and, of course, for the greatest of baseball teams (whose escape from their celebrated curse in the World Series of 2004 marked an epoch in Pete's life).

Over ten years ago, Pete walked into Auburn Correctional Facility, a maximum prison 38 miles north of Ithaca, and set up a program, now known as Cornell at Auburn, which has since then granted Cornell credit to several dozen inmates hungry for learning and for self-respect. Although a number of professors and students have joined Pete over the years, to the men behind bars, Pete and Pete alone is "Doc."

Once, while we were driving together to Auburn, Pete told me he had spent the weekend in Boston advising the president of Harvard on the restructuring of that institution's medieval studies program. From the offices of Derek Bok to the locked schoolroom at Auburn was but a small step for a man who relates to all groups of people with the same direct, unaffected humanity. John Dryden famously said of the General Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, "Here is God's plenty." Chaucer's spirit of open-hearted, generous acceptance of human life obviously reminds me of Pete, but another theme in Chaucer describes him no less well: courtesye. Here are his own words, from the astute, delightfully accessible *Chaucer: The Canterbury Tales*: "Once again we are made to recall the narrator's appeal at the end of the General Prologue. In themselves courtly values are inadequate to the task of ordering social reality, but without courtesy the social world becomes chaotic and human."

—Paul Sawyer

NEW FACULTY Member

Lyrae N. Van Clief-Stefanon, a poet, joined the department last fall as an assistant professor of creative writing. She grew up in Florida, like her "homegirl," Zora Neale Hurston; graduated from Washington and Lee University in 1996; and received her MFA from Pennsylvania State University in 1999. Before coming to Cornell, she taught at the Rockview Penitentiary State College, Pennsylvania State University, Fairfax County Public Schools, and in Cameroon, West Africa, through the U.S. Peace Corps. During the past year at Cornell, Lyrae has also continued her work in prison, teaching creative writing at the Auburn Correctional Facility. *Black Swan* (2002), her first volume of poems, was a finalist for the 2003 Paterson Poetry Prize and won the 2001 Cave Canem Poetry Prize. Her poetry has appeared in many journals and has been anthologized in *Common Wealth: Contemporary Poets of Virginia*; *Role Call: A Generational Anthology of Social and Political Black Literature and Art*; and *Bum Rush the Page: A Def Poetry Jam*. Lyrae is currently working on six different projects, including two books of poetry, *Open Interval* and *Southern Gate*; a collection of essays titled *Purchase*; a novel titled *Six Ways from Sunday*; and a biography of Belle de Costa Greene titled *Belle*.

Kalas

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the rhetorical, oratorical, and logic skills that are necessarily to take positions in that way; I think that our culture on the whole accepts that as a given. I would even venture that the strain of early humanism that saw itself principally as an educational practice for the fashioning of gentleman subjects has enjoyed a rather vigorous and enduring (and sometimes vicious and exclusionary) legacy within the institution of the university, and indeed within the culture at large. But I think the argument does need to be made that we have, by and large, forfeited the legacy of a different strand of early humanism that understood figurative language to be in and of itself a collective form of understanding and a social good. What we might carry away from that strand of humanism is a recognition that figurative language is one of the instruments that cultures have always had for exposing and indeed shaping the social mechanisms that direct our thinking, our practices, and our pleasures as members of a collectivity and as speakers of language, rather than as masterful agents of subjective reason. What the humanistic disciplines, and English departments in particular, let go of in losing sight of that strand of humanism was the potential to make it our very basic premise that figurative language actually does things in the world.

I hope that it is clear that what I am advocating has, ultimately, nothing to do with preserving the legacy of humanism. I wanted to disclose, through the work of Thomas More, that the current impasse in how we might best shape the future of literary study is less topical than it might appear, and may well have been scripted at the origins of humanism itself. I wanted, that is, to observe that humanism set up from the outset an agon between intellectual distinction and social concern, between private interests and the common weal. The only thing more futile than trying to resolve an impasse that is endemic to the whole history of humanism would be trying to do so without realizing that the legacy of humanism has in fact already been spent. I do not mean by this that the humanities are doomed, only that humanism, if it is still one of the defining features of our culture at large (plenty of people would say that we are already posthumanist), will not be so for long. To my thinking it is the phrase "ownership society" that rings the death knell of humanism. An ownership society is the necessary outcome, even fulfillment of humanism, and also its final undoing: it resolves the struggle between private interests and the common weal into a system in which private interests are the only social good. English departments will have a lot more to lose if we think of ourselves only as conservators of culture and purveyors of wisdom. But English departments also stand to gain both purpose and resolve if it should become clear to us that voice and figure in language are reality-based expressions of collective interest, and comprise one of the few remaining media that cannot as yet be measured and codified as commerce by an increasingly monolithic and abstracted market.

Footnotes

1. Sir Thomas More, *Utopia*, trans. Ralph Robynson [1556], ed. David Harris Sachs (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 1999), 201.
2. Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy*, trans., S.G.C. Middlemore (New York: Penguin Books, 1990), 177.
3. Burckhardt, 177 and 179.

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such a center. It would be a fine place for students and faculty to meet, and if nothing else would show that Cornell is serious about the arts and the educational role they can play. The Council has also proposed making a course in the creative arts mandatory for every incoming freshman, a proposal that fascinates me, especially when I consider the long-term consequences it can have (that many more concert- and playgoers, film buffs, art enthusiasts, fiction and poetry readers). Such a proposal, however, would undoubtedly mean hiring a number of artists to teach the additional classes and, on those grounds alone, might prove prohibitive.

The office of Epoch magazine, the hub of creative writing at Cornell, and Michael Koch, editor and teacher.

But in the English Department we have the faculty on hand now (or close to it) to launch an initiative of our own. The present state of affairs is all right, and better than it was, and much better than when Archie proposed disbanding the creative writing program. Even with the program disbanded, Archie would probably have gone ahead and written all those great poems, but think of the students he wouldn't have taught. Alice Fulton comes to mind. No one is a stronger proponent than Alice for pooling our department's talents and interests and seeing what comes of it. Maybe some ungainly beast will emerge, some laughingstock of a hybrid, but if that's the case the Ag School has all those barns where we can hide our mistakes for future generations to study. There's a chance, though, that something remarkable will step forth. Something intensely alive, richly informed, eager to educate itself about cultures not its own, and thrilled—absolutely thrilled—by the beauty and complexity our language can yield. I don't want to wax too poetic, but if a study of the humanities leads us to the humans dominating the world today, then the "poetic" may be our last and best defense.

Faculty NOTES

Mary Pat Brady edited *The Heath Anthology of American Literature*, Fifth Edition, Volumes A-E (2004). She was also awarded the 2004 Robert and Helen Appel Fellowship for Humanists and Social Scientists.

Eric Cheyfitz edited *The Columbia Guide to American Indian Literatures of the United States since 1945* (forthcoming, Columbia University Press). His book *The (Post)Colonial Construction of Indian Country: U.S. American Indian Literatures and Federal Indian Law* will be included in the *Columbia Guide*.

Jonathan Culler's *The Literary in Theory* is forthcoming from Stanford University Press. He has also edited *Structuralism: Critical Concepts*, four volumes (forthcoming from Routledge).

Elizabeth DeLoughrey edited, with George Handley and Renée Gosson, *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture* (forthcoming, University Press of Virginia).

Alice Fulton was awarded the National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship in Poetry, 2005–06.

Andy Galloway edited *The Yearbook of Langland Studies* 17 (2003). *The Penn Commentary on Piers Plowman, Volume 1: Prologue–Passus 4* is forthcoming from University of Pennsylvania Press.

Roger Gilbert edited, with David Burak, *Considering the Radiance: Essays on the Poetry of A. R. Ammons* (W. W. Norton, 2005). He has also been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship to work on a biography of Ammons.

Biodun Jeyifo's *Arrested Decolonization and Postcolonial Studies: Essays in Reflection and Intervention* is forthcoming from Routledge.

Wendy Jones's *Consenting Fictions: Women, Liberalism, and the English Novel,* a study of marriages and the idea of contract in English novels, was published this year by the University of Toronto Press.

Douglas Mao edited, with Rebecca Walkowitz, *Bad Modernisms* (forthcoming from Duke University Press). He has also been awarded a Guggenheim Fellowship.

James McConkey's *The Telescope in the Parlor* was published by Paul Dry Books.

Satya Mohanty has edited, with Linda Martin Alcoff, Michael Hames-Garcia, and Paula Moya, *Identity Politics Reconsidered* (forthcoming, Palgrave). As one of the main coordinators of the Future of Minority Studies (FMS) National Research Project, he has also received a three-year grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation to run the FMS National Research Project Summer Institute at Cornell.

Robert Morgan's biography *Boone: A Life* is forthcoming from Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill. On March 31, 2005, he was inducted into the Fellowship of Southern Writers.

Stephen Parrish has continued his work as the general editor of the Cornell Yeats. Volume 22 was released this year, and Volumes 23 and 24 are forthcoming.

Neil Saccamano edited, with Victoria Kahn, *Politics and the Passions, 1580–1850* (forthcoming from Princeton University Press).

Shirley Samuels edited the *Companion to American Fiction* (Blackwell, 2004).

Dan Schwarz's *Reading the Modern British and Irish Novel: 1890–1950* was published by Blackwell (2005). His *In Defense of Reading* is forthcoming from Blackwell. Dan is also general editor of Blackwell's series Reading the Novel, to which this book belongs. In 2004, he edited *The Early Novels of Benjamin Disraeli* (six volumes) for Pickering and Chatto.

Cushing Strout's *On the Other Side of the Mirror: Prearrangement and Plot in Close-up Card Magic* was published by Isawthat (2005).

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