ENGLISH
AT CORNELL

A NEWSLETTER
FROM THE
DEPARTMENT OF
ENGLISH

SUMMER 1997

Mountain Time: An Interview with Robert Morgan

PAUL SAWYER

Robert Morgan was born in Zirconia, in the mountains of western South Carolina, and came to Cornell as an assistant professor of English in 1971, moving, as he likes to put it, from one end of the Appalachians to the other. He has published nine volumes of poetry, including *Green River: New and Selected Poems* (1991), and a collection of essays and interviews. In 1989 he published his first collection of stories, *The Long Valleys*, which was followed by a second collection, *The Mountains Won't Remember Us* (1992); a triad of interlocked novellas called *The Hinterlands* (1994); and most recently, *The Truest Pleasure*, a novel (1995). His story "The Balm of Gilead Tree," which first appeared in *Epoch* magazine, has been selected for this year's O. Henry Awards (see page 6).

This body of work, all of it dealing with the land and people of the Carolina mountains, has put Morgan at the forefront of a small but distinguished group of American poet-novelists. In both prose and verse, he writes out of an acute sense of the surface, textures, pitted accidents, and events of the earth and the human communities it supports, and with a command of language that is both radiant and craftsmanlike. In verse and prose, his delineation of humble life often turns into moments of extraordinary clarity and emotional intensity.

This interview took place at Bob Morgan's home outside of Ithaca in March 1997.

Paul Sawyer: *How has your last book been received so far?*

Robert Morgan: It's the most successful book I've ever published in terms of sales and reviews. I've received more letters from readers than from any other book, particularly women readers who seemed to respond to the narrator. But one of the most gratifying things about *The Truest Pleasure* was the way it was received by my family. I was a bit worried, because it's based to some extent on my grandparents. I think the book meant the most to the people I grew up with; they've had a lot of fun locating real people among the characters, finding out who is based on whom. One of the things that's surprised me is that some of what was made up seemed to people the truest. For example, the controversy over the boundary lines was made up. Things like that happened but not to these people and not that particular boundary line. Once people read the book they seemed to remember that particular controversy: "you've really got it right, that's the way it was."

What about readers and reviewers outside the region? Are you still being categorized as a "regional" writer?

Well certainly, it's unavoidable, since if you write out of a particular place, you spend a lot of time getting the language right, the voices right. But the word has a new meaning in our time. Twenty-five years ago if you called somebody a regionalist, that was an implicit criticism. I don't think this is true any more. I think that in our multicultural society, to some extent everybody is a regionalist, writing about a particular group or place. In fact it seems to be a

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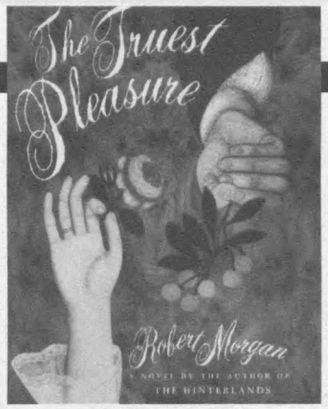

Morgan—continued from page 1

fashion—the "new tribalism" people are talking about. Every story has to take place somewhere. You can't think of a writer more regionalist than Joyce, say; all of his fiction took place in a single city.

So I never felt it was a negative label, the way it was back then, even though I know the history of it. Robert Penn Warren, in his essay, "Some Don'ts for Regionalists," essentially says if the main excuse for writing is that it portrays a region, probably it won't be very good, whereas if you use the place and voices of a region to tell a story, to tell truths that are universal, it can be an advantage. One of the things we enjoy about fiction is that it gives us the sense of learning about people and places we don't know a lot about. There's nothing to compare with the novel for giving us a sense of intimacy with people, with the weather, with the manners, the speech—the vicarious sense of worlds that we would otherwise never see.

The Truest Pleasure is told from the point of view of a woman, and so is some of your earlier fiction as well. How did it come about that you've written so much from the point of view of a woman?

Well, that was a surprise to me. The breakthrough was writing the novella *The Mountains Won't Remember Us*. Most of my fiction had been in the third person or from the point of view of a male character before that. Once I started writing that story, it was like a revelation: that I could write from the point of view of a woman. It was also liberating. I had to become somebody else, I had to work much harder, I had to write better than I could. Learning to write in a distinctive voice, speaking as somebody very different from myself, was one of the most pleasing aspects of fiction writing, and it's the place where you feel like you're growing, in writing out of the point of view and perhaps the intelligence of somebody else. It's interesting that the novel develops at almost exactly the time in history that women started reading, were being taught to read. Even today, for most of the books that sell, women are the buyers. If you go out on a book-reading tour, I would say 90 percent of the people who show up at bookstores to buy books are women.

Your work isn't feminist in any obvious political sense, yet your women characters are often stronger than the men they're married to.

I think in some ways women are easier to write about than men; they are more observant, they—at least in the rural world—are usually more articulate; they have a greater sympathy for other people, they're more interested in relationships with other people, making connections. And that's what fiction does. I think there really is a connection between the evolution of modern fiction and the readership and authorship of women.

In your last novel, Tom and Ginny, the husband and wife, are almost an exaggeration of that distinction.

He's not a word person, he's very physical, works hard; his faith is in himself. His confidence comes from his physical presence, whereas his wife is a reader and a talker, somebody who is comfortable using language. She loves to tell stories, and he is, to say the least, laconic; early in the marriage, she doesn't really know what he's thinking because he's so hesitant to speak. So a lot of the drama comes out of this contrast. If they could talk out their problems, there wouldn't be a story; it's the very inarticulateness that makes it a dynamic relationship and finally a sad one. Tom grew up as an orphan in the period of Reconstruction . . . those were really hard times, and his sense of himself is as somebody who's been strong, who steels himself in adversity, coming from a family without land and without money and opportunity. He never went to school; she is from a more affluent family and also has confidence he does not have. So in that way they are opposites. A lot of the sexual attraction between them comes from that.

One of their problems is his disdain for her religion, which is fervent and Pentecostal, even a form of love. Does she speak for you in this respect?

I'm very sympathetic with her. I was raised, partly, in the Pentecostal Church. Even though I was frightened by the extreme emotions in the services, it also appealed to me; it seemed in some ways a better kind of religion than the dour conservativism of the Baptists. At least people got an emotional experience out of it. I always looked upon them in awe, in fear and awe, and perhaps envy. I never went to a church after I left for college, but I always kept a certain sympathy, frightening as I found it at the time—speaking in tongues.

Speaking of tongues: You've said elsewhere that you have always been suspicious of the emphasis on American speech as a justification for a particular way of writing. Yet the language of your fiction is very much in what would be described as American speech, as opposed to something more artificial or literary. Was that a long struggle for you?

Just because something is accurate, is realistic, doesn't make it good poetry or fiction. You can have a page of dialogue that is perfectly realistic but wouldn't be good fiction because it doesn't tell a story, a character is not revealed by it. The language has got to be interesting, has got to be alive. What you're shooting for is plausibility. There's no such thing as a really accurate way of rendering how somebody speaks, and even if there were such a thing, it would probably be very boring. So what you want to work on is a sense of plausible speech or voice, but also to put into that the emotion, the ideas, the passion the story requires. It's a conjuring act. To get the reader pulled into the story, so he or she believes in the character, you give the narrator the intensity that you need, and you have quite a bit of license; the only requirement is that the reader doesn't stop and say, "I don't believe a word of this" and throw it down. Good writers can often begin a story that's narrated by someone not educated in very simple language, and as they build more toward the epiphany, the language gets a lot more sophisticated. That's just a part of the art of writing; you create the impression that this is just someone speaking with a certain level of education. But writing is all artifice; it's an illusion.

You're an unusual case of someone who started out as a poet and then turned to fiction. How did that change occur?

My earliest writing was primarily short fiction; I was in engineering school, and I took creative writing, and the best writing I did there certainly was in short fiction. It was only when I went to Chapel Hill and got involved in the excitement about poetry in the sixties that I got more and more into poetry. I'm glad I did that because there was no other way for me to learn to write; I had so much to learn about word choice, texture of language, rhythm and that sort of thing, and I needed to do it through writing poems in these short, concentrated blocks of language that allowed me to look at words under magnification, as it were. Later, when I went back to prose writing, I had the advantage of having looked at language so closely and having listened to it so closely that I wrote much better prose than I would have.

But you were already writing about people back then. The first time I saw your poems, I was amazed at how much of a human civilization

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WHAT DO UNIVERSITIES HAVE TO DO WITH PRISONS?

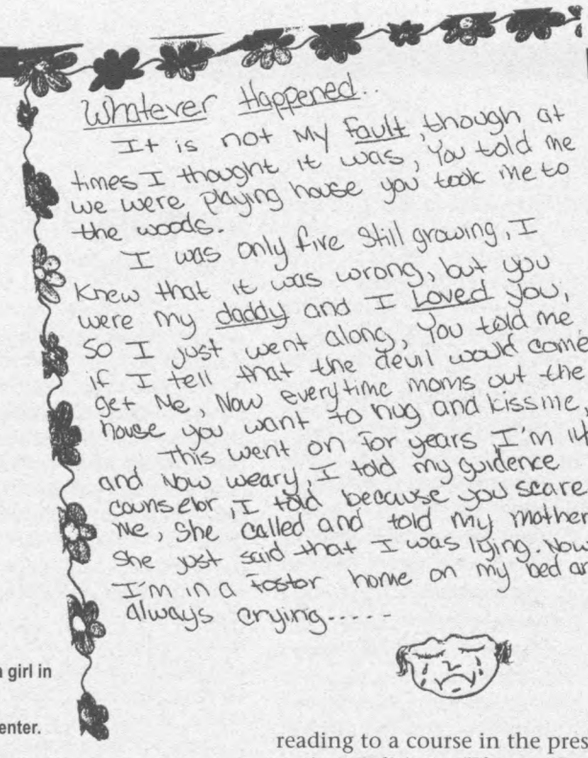
From Ivy Hall to Prison Walls

PAUL SAWYER

Last fall, Ben Olguin, a professor in the English department and the Latino Studies Program, introduced English 696 ("Writing Resistance: U.S. Minority and Third World Prisoner Discourses") into the graduate curriculum. His catalogue description reads, in part: "The reified Prison Industrial Complex has always functioned as a *de facto* site of struggle where power relations are contested from within and without, and in a variety of ways. This course proposes to critically examine the growing body of cultural and political work generated by various prisoners and their allies across time and space." After a list of proposed authors, the description ends tersely: "All students will be required to conduct a special fieldwork project." This requirement meant that the graduate students—Ph.D. candidates in Native American studies, African American literature, Latino studies, and other minority literatures—would be conducting classes inside penal institutions in upstate New York. The experience, in the words of one participant, turned out to be "difficult, but wonderful, one of those life-changing things."

Two of the institutions were correctional facilities: the Lansing Residential Center, for girls, and the Louis Gossett School for Boys, next door. Student-teachers working in these centers selected poems, stories, and memoirs by people with backgrounds like those of the residents—most of them inner-city youngsters of color—on the subject of identity. The teachers then passed out notebooks for the residents to record their responses. The youngsters responded with overwhelming enthusiasm to texts like *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* and April Sinclair's *Coffee Will Make You Black*. One teacher, Ken Stuckey, said, "We approached them on the premise of respect for them. They sensed there was no condescension on our part, and the rapport we developed was stronger because of that." "It became a process of self-identification and empowerment," said Eliza Rodriquez y Gibson. "Since we were giving them women authors of color, people like them, they got the idea that literature included authors other than Shakespeare." "They were so hungry for the literature we were doing, and to have paper and pencils to write," said Annette Portillo.

What did the graduate students learn from this project? The first feature that struck them about the girls' center was its strict regimentation: the girls rose at five, walked in single file, and required permission to speak to each other—except during the Friday afternoon courses and during dinner if the Cornellians dined with them. Residents were also not permitted to reveal their full names or to discuss their past experiences—in order, theoretically, to protect them. This meant that the course, according to Annette Portillo, was ultimately about voice—when and how to speak, as well as what could and could not be read. (The Lansing Center is not a prison: many of the residents were "status offenders," not criminals—youngsters who, for example, had run away from home but had not committed crimes.) Even more striking was the fact that the boys at the Gossett center were not regimented in this way. "They could say whatever they wanted, whereas at the girl's facility, we had guards standing over us all the time," Annette remembered. "The difference between the two facilities interestingly reflected the differences in the socialization of boys and girls in society at large."


Whatever Happened..
It is not My fault though at times I thought it was, You told me we were playing house you took me to the woods.
I was only five still growing, I Knew that it was wrong, but you were my daddy and I Loved you, So I just went along, You told me if I tell that the devil would come get Me, Now everytime moms out the house you want to hug and kiss me,
This went on for years I'm 14 and now weary, I told my Guidence counselor, I told because you scare me, She called and told my mother, She just said that I was lying. Now I'm in a foster home on my bed and always crying.....

Writing and drawings by a girl in the Lansing Residential Center.

To study and theorize such issues as voice, gender, and regimentation is to do a form of "cultural studies"—a way of studying culture and its institutions using the techniques of interpretation traditional to literature (and other) departments. Eliza and her fellow student, Cherene Sherrard, wrote their term paper together on the subject of braiding hair. When the residents rise at five o'clock, the white girls can comb their hair in the few minutes' time they have, but the schedule leaves no time for the black girls to braid. Braiding for black girls can therefore be read as a "signifying practice"—"one of the small resistances," as Cherene puts it, "that helped preserve their identity under oppressive conditions."

The third location for fieldwork was the maximum security prison in Auburn, New York, where Sean Teuton, who is Cherokee, and Vera Palmer, who is Tuscarora, worked with native American prisoners. According to Sean, prisons are for these inmates "another stage of colonialism. Containing indigenous peoples, whether in prisons or on reservations, is basically the same situation." These inmates also responded to readings by using notebooks—for example, recently Sean and Vera taught "Address to Whites," an early nineteenth-century plea by a native American leader, and had the inmates compose their own "Address to Whites." But the range of responses also included drawing, song, dance, and beadwork. The class, which still continues, has therefore expanded beyond a course in reading to a course in the preservation of native traditions. "If we can meet and embrace native American culture, it will help them survive prison," Sean said. The work continues outside the walls as well. In April, Vera presented a paper to an international conference on indigenous peoples in Nebraska.

Cornell University does not simply sit "far above Cayuga's waters"; it rests on Cayuga land. Vera and Sean's next goal—to involve undergraduates from Akwe:kon, the Cornell association for native Americans, in the work at Auburn—symbolizes the fundamental challenge English 696 poses to traditional ideas of separation: the separation of the privileged from the incarcerated, of the disinterested pursuit of knowledge from practical politics, of the university from the world "outside." Within the academy, the course exemplifies the intellectual revolution by which April Sinclair can be as much a part of "English" as Shakespeare, and the braiding of black hair as appropriate an object of study as metrics and elegies. All the students who spoke for this article have chosen to make the experience of English 696 a permanent part of their moral and intellectual lives. "In our society, crime and punishment stand in potential contrast to education; we're taking money from one to use on the other," said Ken Stuckey. "It felt exciting to make education more accessible to people in prison. And it felt important to make people in positions of privilege and power be aware of the ramifications of their access to power and other people's lack of power." "We faced all the problems that accompany thinking about academics as activists," said Cherene Sherrard. For Vera, "I had to face the challenge of being an academic, while remaining totally accountable to the indigenous community as well as to academic standards and expectations."

What about the future of those behind the walls? "We wanted our relationship with them to be ongoing," said Annette Portillo, "but our addresses were torn out of their notebooks." Recently, Ken Stuckey ran into a security guard from Lou Gossett. "He was wondering about next year. He said they're asking about this class all the time."

Opening into Writing

LYDIA FAKUNDINY

Lydia Fakundiny, senior lecturer in the English department, is editor of *The Art of the Essay* (Houghton Mifflin, 1991), an anthology of essays from Bacon to McClane, and the coauthor, with Joyce Elbrecht, of *The Restorationist, Text One: A Collaborative Fiction* by Jael B. Juba (SUNY Press, 1993).

When I began teaching The Art of the Essay (English 388/89) in this department, some fifteen years ago, I had next to no idea what I was doing. I was well past my apprenticeship as a college teacher and no novice to the writing classroom either; yet it was possible then—at least it was possible for me—to conceive of student work quite apart from the notion of "art," a notion that, in its vexed and persistent way, infused all my other readerly and critical relations with the pleasures and provocations of texts. Now as much as then. We speak casually of "the art" of this or that (making introductions, carving a turkey), meaning some knack or skill at bringing the thing off. How such proficiency comes about is a question we would as soon relegate to the ineffable regions of talent, flair. As for "essay," that word, in the writing classroom, could mean only "paper"—as in "a paper on juvenile crime," or "a paper on *To the Lighthouse*." A paper, in pedagogic lingo, was a "composition," or, as in the case of my favorite junior high-school English teacher, a "theme"; once it grew sufficiently scholarly and long, it might earn the name "thesis" or "dissertation," feats which, when issued under the auspices of professional journals or university presses, emerge as "articles" and "monographs."

Lydia Fakundiny is pictured teaching "The Art of the Essay," for years one of the most popular courses in the undergraduate offerings.

For some time, I had been bored and dissatisfied with this state of affairs. It tended to produce student manuscripts more or less filled with predictables of argument and style, some exemplary, some clumsy and ragged, but mostly humdrum—items of exchange in the commerce of requirements and grades. Part of the fault, no doubt, was my own: a first principle of teaching is that you get pretty much what you give. I came to suspect that teaching "English," especially the writing side of it, entails a daily, dogged version of reinventing the wheel: class by class, year by year, you examine as many assumptions—about students, texts, yourself—as you can muster into the arena of full consciousness. Perhaps more realistically, as many such assumptions as the daily exactions of the classroom render inescapable, those you have no choice but to confront (always rebounding in your face as they are) if you are to go on teaching at all. If you are to engage students with the critical passion of a reader.

Composition is a hard taskmaster. Its rigors typically start with the crafting of a thesis about your topic and multiply as you hold yourself to it, systematically, purposefully, in the effort to sustain a coherent argument moving across unified, fully developed paragraphs towards some vision of justified, satisfying closure. That discipline keeps you pruning away everything tangential, dilatory, oblique, inconclusive, self-referential. You are snipping away at the borders, framing the matter at the center. All "irrelevancies" fall under the knife of the paper's "purpose"—just those irrelevancies that the very act of writing, immersion in the play of language itself, puts in the writer's way. And, so, the craft of composition, its very discipline, will necessarily keep the paper from passing over into what Joseph Addison called "the wildness of those compositions which go by the name of essay" (*Spectator* No. 476). For, composition, as I have been speaking of it—as we are trained in it by courses in "expository writing"—is a craft that occludes the unruliness of the very medium it enacts: its exuberance, its interminable possibilities and prospects. It conceals, because its enabling conventions have already decided, problems of where to begin, how to proceed, when and how and whether and why to end. Perhaps best of all, this topic- and idea-centered procedure corrals the anxiety attendant upon moving through language hitched to the everlasting allure of that shaky pronoun "I"—the figure whose intrusions into the impersonal province of the composition is said to be discouraged by schoolteachers (so entering freshmen tell me even now). It is undeniably a useful discipline. Who could dispute how many are the occasions, whether in school or out of it, when one's rhetorical aims are or ought to be clear and definite, when one has something quite determinate to say, when language must assume, for that occasion, the precision and pliancy of a good tool?

Essay writing, I came to think, was precisely not such an occasion. It was, rather, a space—the most accommodating in the realm of prose—for releasing, even venting, just those anxieties (and their attendant pleasures) which the craft of composition is designed to hold in abeyance. Francis Bacon introduced his aphoristic little "essayes" as "these fragments of my conceits" (Epistle Dedicatory, 1597); and, even where essays wax garrulous and vertiginously metadiscursive, their claim to be no more than provisional forays into endlessly fascinating and murky terrain remains constant. An essay is, as everyone knows, on the short side, incomplete, and explicitly subjective. It is one of the delights of good essays, of whatever length, that they manage to convey just that sense of navigating only the briefest, partial transit on the boundless ocean of words, words, words. Montaigne conceived of his essay writing as a kind of getting lost. "If I erased every passage where this happens," he confesses, "there would be nothing left of myself" ("Of Prompt or Slow Speech"). Losing the point brings "chance encounters" with an "I" that writes itself not in accordance with any authorizing system but, as he puts it elsewhere, "only by groping, staggering, stumbling, and blundering" ("Of the Education of Children").

But how was this to be understood? What would keep a student essay from coming

THE PRACTICE OF ESSAYS IS NOT A HONING PRIMARILY OF IDEAS BUT OF WRITING. PRACTICALLY SPEAKING, PROSE—STUFFY, PLAIN, ORNATE, IRONIC, PASSIONATE, SENSUOUS, CEREBRAL, INTIMATE, DISTANCED, SELF-ABSORBED, EXTROVERTED, ON AND ON.

out as mere jumble given that, in the thick of things, the writer is bound to experience the work as, quite simply, a real mess? Montaigne himself (in one of his characteristically contradictory moves) offers a clue: "I go out of my way, but rather by license than carelessness. My ideas follow one another, but sometimes it is from a distance, and look at each other, but with a sidelong glance" ("Of Vanity"). Resistance to conventions of linear exposition and continuous argument is itself a sort of discipline; both while composing and in the incremental process of rewriting, obliqueness becomes the condition of a novel search for coherence, form. In the words of Theodor Adorno (who seems to me the most cogent modern thinker on the essay): the essay "takes the anti-systematic impulse into its own procedure"; it "proceeds so to speak methodically unmethodically" ("The Essay as Form"). How, then, to enact a pedagogy of the writing classroom as a scene of such disciplined blundering and getting lost?

As she is about much else, Virginia Woolf is emphatically clear about the essay's art: an essayist, she insists, "must know—that is the first essential—how to write" ("The Modern Essay"). If the composition prepares students to conscript language into the service of their ideas, then, I thought, let the essay be a sort of training playground for entry into the ways and means of language. In short: the practice of essays must, before all else, be a writerly practice. Not a honing primarily of ideas but of writing. Practically speaking: prose. All kinds of prose—stuffy, plain, ornate, ironic, passionate, sensuous, cerebral, intimate, distanced, self-absorbed, extroverted, on and on. Sentences windingly long as a pedagogue's, or curt as a hard-boiled detective's; paratactic sentences with their ruptures and reticences, and compulsively explanatory Baldwinian hypotaxis; periodic sentences with their Johnsonian air, and sentences that accumulate in bits and run—favorites of the twentieth-century essayists. The idea would be to learn by doing, play at all such styles. Train oneself to write by imitating others writing.

And, so, the oldest of pedagogies became a staple of the Art of the Essay—and, if I have any qualms about stylistic imitation, they have to do with never really having the time to do enough of it. The practice of style has become, for me, the key to my students' verbal competence, their hoarded familiarity as readers of English with patterns that have been largely invisible and inaccessible to them as writers. Imitation serves as a pleasurable negotiation with those bugaboos of composition classes, grammar and diction, thus building self-consciously held skills for rewriting and editing. At the same time, it involves the practitioner in a sort of mapping of conceptual and affective topographies of English prose. Predictably, imitations have a tendency to spill over into student essays, staging as they do both tryouts of selves and of topics inviting amplification.

The complement to these enactments of prose style is intensive reading, immersion in essays old and new, by writers in English wherever and whenever they may be found. The point is to read not as a critic or scholar or student, but as a writer—a "fellow worker," as Woolf said, "an accomplice" ("How Should One Read a Book?"). That is to say, an interested party—someone who wants above all to learn how a thing is done, to compose the text as it were all over again. The activities of recollection, speculation, observation, and critique characteristic of essays in English are fashioned from an infinitely variable mix of discourses, modulations from storytelling and sensory evocation to explanation, analysis, polemic. Reading as a writer, one reads (both analytically and sympathetically) to lay out the essay's amplificatory path, to see how a given text articulates itself, how the shaping of discourse constructs what the essay "says." This kind of reading becomes both a stimulus to writing essays and a sort of gradual practical orientation: it models the possibilities of craft, of variety and difference.

All that is a much-condensed and, admittedly, tidied-up version of how I groped my way from teaching composition to teaching writing by way of the essay, Alfred Kazin's "open form." In the late 1980s, while I worked on my anthology *The Art of the Essay* (a book meant to serve those in particular for whom reading and writing essays were moments of a single process), I discovered that my evolving insights were paralleled in classrooms around the country, that my own little absorbing plot of readerly and pedagogic entanglements with the essay was part of what scholars call "an emerging field." Criticism and theory of the essay began to appear in professional conferences, journals, monographs, and collections; English curricula here and there began including study of essays as "literature" at both undergraduate and graduate levels; "personalism," long associated with the essay, erupted in the domains of scholarship, often as feminist or post-structuralist resistance to reigning conventions of academic discourse. Meanwhile, more anthologies of essays (sometimes redundantly called "personal essays") rolled off the presses. An international reference work, *The Encyclopedia of the Essay,* is on the publishing horizon. Perhaps most interesting, the study and practice of essays is being drawn into the wider field of "literary nonfiction," also known as "creative nonfiction." While both rubrics beg questions about contested terms such as "literariness" and "fictionality," they also bring together a whole range of writings that overlap and merge in practice: essay, memoir, travel piece, literary (or "new") journalism. "Creative nonfiction" (the name, incidentally, of a new periodical) is fast becoming a commodity marketed by how-to books and widespread advertisements for workshops and degree programs in the field. The essay and its relatives, long orphan practices on the margins of academe, have slipped in through the gates and sallied into the hall, if not exactly to the head of the table.

Having said all that, I want to emphasize that I still consider that artifact of the classroom, the "composition" or "paper," an indispensable exercise as it is undertaken, for example, in most of our freshman writing seminars (including my own). It disciplines habits of analysis and synthesis, striving to deploy language referentially, as what Richard Lanham terms a "transparent" medium, a window on the landscape of thought (*Analyzing Prose*). Its schemes of organization, its apparently disinterested stance, its economical drive towards convincing closure not only mirror in broad ways the conventions of most fields students will pass through in college but also equip them with a kind of literacy which, it's hoped, will translate into professional know-how of various kinds. As for the essay and the essay-writing classroom, these seem to me congenial and minimally intimidating sites for exploring, in occasional and contingent ways, the very notions by which the genre defines itself, notions such as "truth" and "fiction"; "form" and "style"; "self," "voice," and the category of the "personal"; "genre" itself.

One of the essay's striking features, persisting over time and across cultures, is its reflexivity, its tendency to investigate and reflect upon its own processes and, thus, to theorize the conditions of its own making. "I write of . . . my writings as of my other actions, because my theme turns in upon itself." Montaigne, "Of Experience." It is not enough, the essayists suggest, to amplify a theme (or, as Addison had it, "to print [oneself] out," *Spectator* No. 1); it is as if the discursiveness of essays pulls the writing towards encounters with its own ever-appearing, ever-disappearing marks. Essays delight in self-critique. Essays glance sideways, backwards, read and reread themselves; and it is just this attentiveness to their own scriptive peregrinations that so recommends itself as an apprenticeship in the craft and the art of prose. If not exactly a matter of reinventing the wheel, my engagement with the essay and related discourses has led me to review and reconstruct my own part in the institutional project of literacy. This is simply to say that writing comes to mean something more, that the teaching of writing brings me back to where, as an immigrant child and a stranger to the English language, I began nearly a lifetime ago: to the letters and syllables, words and sentences, the run of it in the voice and on the page. To the difference it makes.

Balancing the Demand and the Delight: Preparing the English Professional at Cornell

DEBRA FRIED

DIRECTOR OF GRADUATE STUDIES

Prospective applicants to the Cornell Ph.D. program in English occasionally write me to ask about the "type of student Cornell is looking for." Since we receive almost 500 applications each year for an entering class of about fourteen, there's an understandable curiosity about what special quality distinguishes the students admitted to the program.

A glance at the titles of dissertations completed in the past five years suggests why it's a difficult question to answer. Are we looking for the type of student who is interested in "George Eliot and the Victorian Discourses of Gender and Historiography" (Rohan Maitzen, now teaching at Dalhousie University) or in "Gender Magic: Desire, Romance, and the Feminine in Sir Gawaine and the Green Knight" (Geraldine Heng, University of Texas/Austin) or in "Domesticity and Empire: Gender and Imperialism in Anglo-India" (Alison Sainsbury, Illinois Wesleyan University)? There's no doubt that feminist approaches to literature have been of importance to a range of successful and innovative Ph.D. theses in English coming out of Cornell in recent years, but I couldn't reply to inquiring applicants that we're looking for feminists.

Fascinating work has also been produced of late by graduate students who bring their training as readers and interpreters of literature to the study of visual media in dissertations such as "Rearranging the Furniture: The Apparatus of Subjectivity in 1950s Cinema" (Sabrina Barton, University of Texas at Austin) or "Reading by Half-Light: Cinematic Spectatorship in Modernist Women's Writing" (Rebecca Egger, University of Michigan at Ann Arbor). And Cornell has played a crucial part in producing a new generation of scholars in eighteenth-century and Restoration literature, with dissertations such as "Dangerous Publics: Literature, Culture-Consumption and Political Activism in the 1790s" (Andrew McCann, University of Queensland, Australia), and "Colonial Production, Domestic Consumption: Narrative and Politics in Eighteenth-Century England" (Charlotte Sussman, University of Colorado at Boulder). Yet I can't say that we're seeking a coterie of Restoration buffs or film fans, either.

In the past five years, our program has turned out specialists in minority literatures as well, with dissertations such as "Learning from Experience: Politics, Epistemology, and Chicana/o Identity" (Paula Moya, Stanford University) and "Bodies in Collision: African-American Fiction and the Sexual Politics of Narrative" (Terry Rowden, University of Colorado at Boulder). But then again, the "type of student we're looking for" might become a scholar of Victorian autobiography or Shakespearean performance, of Emerson's poetry or Romantic apostasy, of medieval vernacular audiences or of Captain Cook's voyages.

At its best, our program puts its emphasis on preparing students to write dissertations that are strong and learned, innovative and enduring—and doing it before they tire of the menu at Moosewood. Becoming "professional" in the field of literary scholarship obviously involves a number of skills and kinds of training. Writing valuable, publishable contributions to the field is obviously one of them; so is designing an engaging and practical syllabus for a freshman writing course and learning to make comments on student essays in the most effective way; so is maintaining and deepening one's delight in poetry, novels, and ideas in the face of the profession's sometimes peremptory demand to turn out scholarship about them. Perhaps we're simply looking for students who will benefit from what Cornell as a program seems to me best at—balancing the demand and the delight.

Graduate students have been designing a number of freshly conceived courses and teaching them in the Freshman Writing Seminar program. Here again the spectrum of interests is wide: witchcraft in Shakespeare's England, sexual subcultures, the aesthetic of walking, the visions of medieval religious women, the novels of Toni Morrison. The same variety marks the informal reading groups initiated by graduate students. There's one group surveying the literature of the Pacific Rim, another for "Gothic and Sensation Novels," and another devoted to Thomas Pynchon.

The M.F.A./Ph.D. program continues to attract an increasing number of applicants. Only one or two students are admitted to this joint-degree program each year, which requires both an M.F.A. thesis (in poetry or fiction) and a work of literary scholarship for the Ph.D. degree. They are both "entanglers and untanglers," in the words of A. R. Ammons in *Set in Motion* (University of Michigan Press, 1996), a collection of his essays and interviews edited by Zofia Burr (George Mason University), another recent Ph.D., who also holds an M.F.A. in poetry from Cornell. Ammons provides the best answer—another question—to the applicant's question: "Why not let all of us who work with language follow our inclinations, entangling or untangling, or both?"

Epoch Honored at Fifty

This year marks the fiftieth anniversary of *Epoch*, a magazine of fiction and poetry founded in 1947 by professor Baxter Hathaway and co-edited by members of the MFA program at Cornell. The editorial office, housed in Goldwin Smith across from the English department office, has served as a combination of work space, conference room, and common ground for writers and their teachers at Cornell. *Epoch* has therefore been an integral part of the writing program; but it is also a national magazine with a national reputation, having brought out the early published work of Don De Lillo, Thomas Pynchon, Philip Roth, Joyce Carol Oates, and other well-known writers.

Michael Koch

Although stories and poems from *Epoch* have regularly appeared in prize anthologies, these collections are usually dominated by big-circulation literary magazines. This year was different. The editors of *Prize Stories 1997: The O. Henry Awards*, the most prestigious prize anthology for fiction, chose four stories from *Epoch*—more than from any other magazine. One of the four was "The Balm of Gilead Tree," by Robert Morgan.

How does it happen that a small magazine, produced in Ithaca and financed on a shoestring, manages to hold its own with the likes of *The Atlantic* and *The New Yorker*? Michael Koch, the editor of *Epoch* since 1989, believes the magazine would not be what it is without the contribution of students. "Several of the prize winners were picked out of the slush pile by first-year MFAs," he remarks. He also credits the "steady direction" given the magazine by the regular poetry and fiction editors, Burl Barr and Joe Martin. But Michael Koch clearly stands at the center of *Epoch*'s achievements. According to Joe Martin, "Michael reads stories incredibly well, and incredibly openly—never from the point of view of a writer who only likes writing similar to his own."

Epoch's new recognition comes at a critical time. Because of federal cuts in arts funding, the magazine has lost—probably permanently—its $4,000 annual contribution from the NEA. Meanwhile, its fiftieth anniversary celebration, featuring readings by well-known contributors, will take place September 25–27, Homecoming Weekend.

Faculty Notes

A. R. Ammons's most recent volume of poems is *Brink Road* (1996, W. W. Norton and Company). His next book will be entitled *Bosh and Flapdoodle*.

Barbara Correll's book *The End of Conduct: Grobianus and the Renaissance Text of the Subject* was published by Cornell University Press in 1996.

Jonathan Culler's *A Very Short Introduction to Literary Theory* will appear from Oxford University Press in fall 1997. He is a member of the Christian Gauss Prize committee and of the National Advisory Council of the Woodrow Wilson Foundation, and is editor of *Diacritics*, a journal of theory and criticism published at Cornell. He has been chair of the Cornell English department since 1996.

Debra Fried is coauthor of *Teaching with the Norton Anthology of Poetry*, the fourth edition of which appeared this year.

Andy Galloway has just received the Robert and Helen Appel Award, which honors newly promoted faculty members whose work contributes significantly to education in the arts college.

Mary Jacobus's *First Things: The Maternal Imaginary in Literature, Art, and Psychoanalysis* was published by Routledge in 1995.

Alison Lurie's most recent book is *The Heavenly Zoo* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux). She is vice president for literature of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

Dan McCall is working on the screenplay for his novel *Triphammer*.

Jim McConkey's anthology *The Anatomy of Memory* was published by Oxford University Press in 1996.

Scott McMillin's book *The Queen's Men and Their Plays: 1583–1603* is forthcoming from Cambridge University Press.

Tim Murray has edited *Mimesis, Masochism, and Mime: The Politics of Theatricality in Contemporary French Thought* (1997). His new book, *Drama Trauma: Performance Readings in a Multi-Cultural Age*, is forthcoming from Routledge. He is co-editor of *Repossessions: Psychoanalysis and the Question of Early Modern Culture*, forthcoming from the University of Minnesota.

Steve Parrish is general editor of the concordance to the poems and plays of T. S. Eliot. Volumes in two other general editorial projects—the Cornell Wordsworth and the Cornell Yeats—continue to appear or are in progress.

Shirley Samuels's *Romances of the Republic: Women, the Family, and Violence in the Literature of the Early American Nation* was published in 1996 by Oxford University Press.

Dan Schwarz has two books forthcoming from St. Martin's Press: *Reconfiguring Modernism* and *Imagining the Holocaust*.

Mark Seltzer's book *Serial Killers I II III* is forthcoming from Routledge.

Kate Shanley's critical study of James Welch, *Only an Indian*, is forthcoming from the University of Oklahoma Press.

Harry Shaw is editor of *Critical Essays on Sir Walter Scott* (1996).

Gordon Teskey's *Allegory and Violence* appeared from Cornell University Press in 1996.

Helena Viramontes's novel *Under the Feet of Jesus* has received the John Dos Passos Prize for Literature (1996).

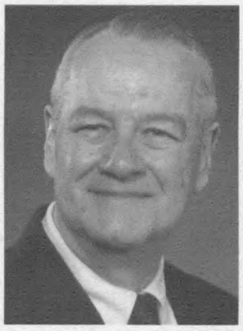
TEACHING AWARDS

Five members of the English department received honors for teaching in the past year. **Ann Boehm** received the Clark Outstanding Teaching Award for lecturers; **Cathy Carlson** and **Peter Coviello** received Clark awards for teaching assistants. **Molly Hite** and **Ewa Badowska** received the Russell Distinguished Teaching Award for 1996 and 1997, respectively.

APPOINTMENTS AND RETIREMENTS

Ellis Hanson joined the Cornell English department in fall of 1995, specializing in gay studies and in nineteenth-century literature. He graduated from Vassar College and received his M.A. degree from Columbia and his Ph.D. degree from Princeton. He currently has three books in press: *Decadence and Catholicism*, forthcoming from Harvard University Press; *Cruising the Screen*, a collection of essays on gay studies and film, forthcoming from Duke University Press; and *Out Takes*, a collection of essays he edited, also forthcoming from Duke.

Donald Eddy, bookman and scholar, retired from the Cornell English department last spring after thirty-five years of teaching. For twenty-five of those years, he held a joint appointment from the Department of English and the Department of Rare Books in Olin Library, where he built up the collection's holdings in literature. Because of Don's work, Cornell now holds collections of Swift, Pope, and Johnson that are ranked among the top two or three in the world, as well as preeminent collections in several other authors. His expertise as a bookman carried over to the teaching of two popular undergraduate courses, "The History of the Book," and more recently, "Art, Isotopes, and Analysis." In retirement, Don looks forward to devoting even more time to research. His current project, *A Bibliography of Richard Hurd*, will be his twenty-second published volume.



Morgan—*continued from page 2*

was present, even though on first glance you appeared to be a "nature" poet. There was no contradiction in your work between being a social and a nature poet.

In my early poems I endeavored to see things, ordinary things, in new ways; discovering the world, to give the reader a sense of the world, of having noticed things they might have forgotten they knew. But I discovered that even describing the world of nature, you always see it filtered through culture. I found I was very interested in artifacts, things made by hand, and in the way in which human labor had interacted with the natural world, the landscape. Road-building, dam-building. And one of my major subjects was work, how we get it done, the aesthetic experience of work, the wisdom of it. I wanted to structure language to show the world in new ways.

The three novellas in The Hinterlands *can be described in one way as three stages in the making of a thoroughfare.*

The trace, the road, and then the highway. That was a surprise to me, that they were all about road-building. I've discovered that one of the things that's interested me as a writer is to describe what we do to land, what people do to it in plowing fields and building roads and cutting down trees, and the way that changes the landscape, and the way these changes erode and decay.

One of the remarkable features of your work in prose is its concern with historical change. Both The Hinterlands *and your second collection of stories range over a long space of time. But the title of that collection is* The Mountains Won't Remember Us. *That's an odd title for a book that concerns history.*

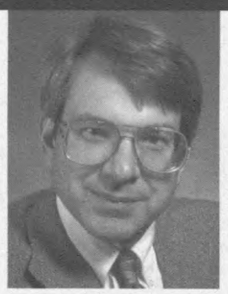
The title comes from the narrator of the novella; she's in her seventies, and she observes that for all the seeming significance of human stories, anguish, pain, these in fact leave little impact on the landscape. I think that moment pleases her, that act of feeling less important in the universe.

The critic Bill Harmon once called your poetry a type of "Pelagian georgics," in reference to your line, "The statute of limitations has run out on original sin." That's not at all a bleak view.

I think when you were raised as a fundamentalist at the beginning of the Cold War period, that the view of the world is so bleak that almost everything afterward seemed optimistic. I remember my grandfather in 1950s saying that nuclear weapons were going to blow up the world at any moment. I think I've been increasingly optimistic ever since. But I've never felt pessimistic in the particular fundamentalist way—that view of everything evil at the center of the universe that has to be fought. Bill Harmon discovered that Pelagius, the theologian who was condemned as a heretic for denying original sin, was originally from Britain and his real name was Morgan, which means in Welsh "by the sea." Of course the Welsh are known for their poetry of praise.

Letter from the Chair

JONATHAN CULLER



As new chair of the Cornell Department of English, I take great pleasure in introducing this newsletter. Now that computers make it easier for professors to produce newsletters, we hope to communicate with our alumni more regularly than we have in the past. Those of us who still prefer book and paper to screen and net-browser hope that you will find items of interest here, but anyone who wants to be electronically with it can get up-to-the-minute information about the English department's courses and faculty at our Web site: *http://www.arts.cornell.edu/English.*

I am pleased to report that the English department is doing well. We enroll some 5,000 students per year in our courses; we attract about a hundred majors a year, who go on to a variety of careers; our graduate program has been regularly recognized as one of the best in the country. This year, *U.S. News and World Report* published a survey that ranked us third, behind the University of California at Berkeley and Yale—the highest ranking for any Cornell department. This survey also placed us in the top five in four of the seven specialties rated: third in critical theory, fourth in medieval literature, fifth in nineteenth- and twentieth-century British literature, and fifth in Third World literature. Last year a survey that was conducted differently ranked us sixth nationally in the quality of our faculty and second in effectiveness of our program.

But how does an English department merit a good reputation these days? The field of English, as everyone has heard by now, is not what it once was. Was it ever, I wonder, what it once was? Or was it always already in a state of contestation? I came across an article recently complaining that critics "have patronized Nietzsche, found something entertaining in every kind of revolutionist, and welcomed the strangest philosophies." This was not something in *The New Criterion* but a piece by Van Wyck Brooks from 1918. And in 1926, William Drake wrote in the introduction to an anthology called American Criticism, "we stand today at the center of a vast disintegration." What would a department chair have written in a newsletter in the twenties?

One tradition in the Cornell English department, which I trace to the benign influence of M. H. Abrams, is that even when faculty are fighting battles against foes of different critical persuasions outside the university, they have been ecumenical at home and have not sought to convert the department to some orthodoxy. The result is that we harbor people who see literary and cultural studies in quite different ways but have been able to avoid divisive battles about the curriculum. That Cornell English could be ranked high in both medieval literature and in critical theory shows that we have in some measure succeeded in achieving pluralism without the mediocrity that permissiveness might bring.

> THAT CORNELL ENGLISH COULD BE RANKED HIGH IN BOTH MEDIEVAL LITERATURE AND IN CRITICAL THEORY SHOWS OUR SUCCESS IN ACHIEVING PLURALISM WITHOUT MEDIOCRITY.

The down side, as they say, is that we have not had a collective vision of what literary studies should be. As a new chair, I feel that I ought to take on "the vision thing," try to get us to reflect more seriously on what we are offering our students at various levels of the curriculum. This is not a matter of requirements, as the national press seems to feel it ought to be—requiring that you cannot get a B.A. in English without having read the following books: (fill in the blanks yourself). Rather, it is a matter of thinking more systematically both about what sorts of study we should offer to people who are not English majors and about how to introduce students to the variety of studies that take place in English departments today.

This year we began by discussing our 200-level courses and have discovered (no surprise here!) that we have quite different views about how the field of literary and cultural studies should be entered. Through a historical survey of English literature, following the *Norton Anthology,* say some; through courses focused on the techniques of reading the major genres—fiction, poetry, and drama—say others; through a course that exposes students to the different kind of activities that occur under the aegis of literary studies today, say others. Since the first two sorts of courses already exist, we are going to try the third, and will offer several new introductory courses next year. For example, Shakespeare and the Twentieth Century, taught by Walter Cohen, one of the four editors of the new *Norton Shakespeare,* will look at a number of plays from different angles, approaching them with different kinds of questions, and reflecting on twentieth-century interpretations and adaptations of the plays. How does Shakespeare work today? What is the cultural significance of these plays?

Perhaps next year I shall have a vision as well as a course to report.

In the fall of 1997 we will welcome a new assistant professor, Jacqueline Goldsby, a specialist in American studies, who is completing a dissertation at Yale entitled "After Great Pain: The Cultural Logic of Lynching and Realist Representation, 1880–1922." She will teach the Age of Realism and Naturalism, a survey of African American literature, and a course on the child in literature.

ENGLISH
AT CORNELL

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