Poetry, Sorrow, and Surprise:  
A Conversation with Alice Fulton

Award-winning poet, fiction-writer, and essayist Alice Fulton first came to Cornell in 1980 as a graduate student in the creative writing program. Two decades after earning her MFA, she returned to Cornell as the Ann S. Bowers Distinguished Professor of English, having spent the intervening years on the faculty at the University of Michigan. This past spring Fulton published her sixth collection of poems, Barely Composed. Considerably darker in tone than its predecessors, the book reflects on personal experiences of grief and suffering, most prominently the death of the poet’s mother, whom Fulton cared for in her final months, as well as more general forms of trauma and atrocity. Alice Fulton spoke with her colleague Roger Gilbert last August about her experiences as a Cornell student, the development of her poetry, and her most recent book.

RG: You were accepted to the creative writing programs at both Cornell and Syracuse. How did you decide on Cornell?  
AF: I got the call from Cornell—it was Jim McConkey. Jim is such a sweet man, but he was very formal that day. He didn’t say much, just that they had accepted me. And of course I was very happy. Then I must have gotten a call, I don’t remember as well from Syracuse, and I had some time to decide, as you do. I had gotten a fellowship to the MacDowell Colony, so I went there and still hadn’t decided. What I did at MacDowell—this is part of me that I think is pretty deep, though it sounds superficial—I flipped a coin. For me that’s not an idle gesture. I believe in, not God, but accident and chance. So I flipped a coin, and I think it came up Syracuse. And then I decided, two out of three. That’s how you know! So I called and accepted way before the deadline.

I came to visit the campus in April, and I met Archie [Ammons] for the first time. He had read my chapbook, and he said very kind things about my work. He said, “You can come here and hang around, and we’d be glad to have you, but I have nothing to teach you. Your poems are there already.” Twenty years later I began to understand what he said as: your poems are there already, as if there were a scroll inside you. You’ll write it. It’s not that they’re where they can be, but that they’re in you and will come out, like DNA.

You can learn from people who say they have nothing to teach you, just as there are people who think they have everything to teach you and you never learn anything. A lot of it is the posture of the student. There are students who can wring everything out of a teacher, who know how to learn, who are receptive, ready, there at the right time. I learned from Archie without his having to do any formal teaching.

RG: Did he ever come into class with written notes?  
AF: No. He’d come in with a dirty joke. They amused him. I always thought he was an amazingly naked person. Whatever he said to me was from the viscera. It’s hard to know how you could hear some of the things he said and not be offended—but it wasn’t offensive for me, it really wasn’t.

Archie was very informal and friendly. His door was open, he was empathetic. In fact he didn’t trust people who were too perfect, and that was one of my problems: I seemed too “elegant,” he would say. But when I learned that you could go in and tell Archie something awful that had happened—what a relief it was to know you had a friend. And he would come back with stuff that maybe professors don’t usually say to students, but that was the reciprocity. That’s why I never thought what he told me was inappropriate. I was disburdening and so was he.

RG: What about the other poetry faculty you worked with—Bob Morgan, Phyllis Janowitz, Ken McClane?  
AF: Bob was an excellent close reader. He would fasten right on and give you the most wonderful close readings of your work. He was very generous about inviting students to his house for dinner. And I loved Bob’s work.
read Bob before I came here, and I had his books. When I got here I asked him to sign them—I am a true fan. The concision and concreteness of Bob's work countered some of the abstraction in Archie's. The two of them were just so different. And the narrative that Bob did, the characters and people. I learned a lot from him about craft and concrete images in poetry. He was a wonderful teacher.

Ken was unlike anybody I ever met before—so generous, full of energy, kind, deeply kind. I was his teaching assistant that summer when you have to work with someone. So I was Ken's assistant, and he would jump up on the table to teach. He's just so physical. The great thing too was that we were friends. I'd go over to Ken and Rochelle's house and we'd do something. I really listened to him. He told me to read all of James Baldwin and I did. I read everything. And I read Ken's work very closely too. The anger in Ken's work and the politics was so wonderful, and he coupled it with his influence from Archie as a nature poet.

And then Phyllis—thank God, a woman! I mean I'm a feminist, I wanted a woman teacher. I walked into her office the first day, and she was so open, no games. I had just won this little award from the Poetry Society of America, and she said "Oh yeah, I think I won that once too," and she began giving me the lowdown on the PSA, who's in it, what to watch out for, what they're like. She was so absolutely honest. She just told me the whole politics, but laughing. She was one of the funniest people—she had a great wit.

RG: I can see affinities between Phyllis's poetry and yours.

AF: Her first two books were so original. They were not only dark and sardonic but witty and funny. Phyllis loved Beckett, and there's a darkness in her work that she actually learned from him. It's beautifully crafted work, and so funny in a weird, offbeat way, with characterization that wasn't quite biographical—you couldn't say Fat Lena or Revolutionary Lulu were anybody in her life. And so moving to me. She has a poem about her mother that I can hardly read without crying.

From all those people what I valued was the friendship. There was no sense of hierarchy; it was—we're all in this together, we're all writers, poets, who want to do this crazy thing. Archie would say, "This is a tough business." Phyllis would tell me about how hard it had been for her to write and publish her books, what the politics were. So I was getting real friendship from all of them, and that was the most valuable thing. When I came back, I said to Ken and Phyllis, "You know I was only at Cornell for two years." We all said, "That was only two years?"

RG: I'd like to ask you about your own poetics. It seems to me even from your earliest work one of the hallmarks of your poetry has been a certain density or maximalism. You like to load every rift with ore, as Keats says. Has that always been a conscious aim for you? Or is it just the way your imagination works?

AF: When I came to Cornell, I had published a long poem that was influenced by William Carlos Williams's "Of Asphodel that Greeny Flower," and I showed it to Archie, as well as some others in that vein that I'd written at the Millay Colony. I also had poems that were denser, and I showed him both, and I said, "I don't know which way to go." A poet, Marvin Bell, had told me my poems were "leaden," and that I should go in this other direction both, and I said, "I don't know which way to go." Archie would say, "This is a tough business. How far did you feel you were allowing yourself to go in pushing boundaries of intelligibility and logic? How did you arrive at this level of difficulty?

AF: It was trying to write a kind of poem I like to read. My advice to students is try to write the kind of book you like to read. There's nothing else you can do. I like things that are resistant but also give a certain pleasure. It can't just be resistant because then it's no fun. Why bother? To give a quality that you don't grasp immediately, and there's all the space between what you do understand, that famous poetic leaping—that sort of thing I really like. I like early Marianne Moore more than I like Elizabeth Bishop. I like poetry that's a little bit hard, that you have to go back and reread.

RG: Do you see a connection between difficulty as a feature of writing and the difficulty of certain kinds of emotional content?

AF: It's probably true, because sometimes looking at the most difficult things to write about, language really is not up to it, so you end up with these opaque areas where it can't be said. Or sometimes saying it in a broken way is the truest to the experience, letting language itself break down to express the breakdown of the life.

RG: The book's difficulty feels at every point like it's coming out of powerful emotion.

AF: I'm so glad you felt that. I had no idea whether anything would come through that went into these poems. I do think for me it's probably my most deeply felt book, that went to the deepest places. At the same time I feel that in my earlier work thinking and emotion are very connected. When I read poetry, even if it isn't a poem that's about love or death or anything emotional, if it's a poem that's beautifully made and surprises me, I feel something. I feel delight; I feel astonishment. So for me feeling in poetry isn't connected just to expression or emotive effect, it's connected to the depth of the art. Yet I recognize that in this new book I'm actually writing about emotions that don't come from language.

RG: And so much of that emotional content is really pain. When you're writing about this kind of experience there's a dissonance between the pleasure of language and the pain that's giving rise to language and being expressed through it. That can be very potent.

AF: Another thing I'm writing about is horror. I realized during these long years of trauma that I was living a horror movie. I thought, God, my mother dying, you would think it would be another genre—tragedy, maybe lyric. But no, this is the horror genre. And how do you do this without being gothic or sentimental? How can these emotional states come through language? One way that I tried to do it was to be unsettling, to put in a word that would be like a shock, to draw upon qualities of language and emotion like squeamishness, disgust, horror, things we don't want to look at, repugnance. I tried not to overdoo it, but to let that just come through at times as an undercurrent. That would give rise to the kind of effect I was hoping for, so that the emotion would be true to the cause, true to what happened.
RG: There are threads running through the book, but they don't form a narrative. It feels more like a circling back to certain traumas that had to be dealt with repeatedly in different ways.

AF: That's exactly right. When Cynthia Hogue was here she said, “What's your book about?” There must have been a ten second pause. And then I said, “It's about time, death, and love.” I didn't know what else to say. And then I had to try to say more when I described it for my publisher, so I said, “It's a book about suffering and trauma.” I read on those subjects, trying to learn how to think about those things. And then to include the personal.

RG: You do include the personal. That felt very new to me. I know you have an aversion to the confessional, the transparently autobiographical, and yet it felt like you just had to talk about your mother's illness and death and some of the details of that experience. Was that a hard thing for you to do?

AF: It wasn't going to be just telling the story of how my mother died. I guess that's why I began reading about trauma, thinking about what other people have been through. Maybe a good example is the poem “Forcible Touching” in the second section. It's not about my mother. There's this artifact I kept. One of my young nieces died, and at the funeral her little sister was given this awful coloring book, where you could color scenes from the funeral. The persona was a bear or something—I changed it to a chipmunk. I thought if they gave me that as a child I would have been so traumatized. I actually have the coloring book, and when I was writing about this I thought, I've had it for ten years—now is the time. So I took it out and began looking at it and thinking about how the obsessiveness of trauma is like the act of coloring in the book—you stay in the lines, you keep rubbing the color over the page. And so that artifact led me to write that poem, “Forcible Touching.” Part of the forcible touching, of course, was the coloring, the act of memory itself being a kind of forced touching. There's a lot of that in the book, and a lot of attempts to try to come to terms with what happened. I wanted to do justice to my mother and I never did. All I could do was myself, finally.

RG: You do justice to her in your short stories.

AF: I think I do. In the stories she really comes alive—that's what she was like. Barely Composed is much more elegiac, more like the experience of going through trauma myself.

RG: You aren't staging these events in the way other poets might, but they're present in a very powerful way. You make your experiences visible without letting them take over the poetry.

AF: I didn't know how to do it, because I've never really written too much that's autobiographical. In Palladium there's a poem called “Traveling Light.” My father died when I was 20, and there's a memory, a scene from when he was dying, but it's told very directly. He was in a hospital, and the responsibility wasn't so much on me. I was more traumatized with my mother, I think. Though it was traumatic with my father, too. Sometimes I think I've had the Twelve Traumas. You can just say through your life there were twelve experiences that were really traumatic. Recently there's been a tipping point, where it's like, as Phyllis [Janowitz] would say, "another last straw?" You reach that tipping point and you think, this is the final trauma, I'm saturated.

But I read, looking for consolation in people who have suffered more, and there certainly are millions. I read Cathy Caruth's anthology on trauma, and I read a lot of people testifying on the Holocaust, and was very moved and educated. And I read about Stalinism in Russia, the police state, what people suffered in Siberia when they were sent there. I was looking for a way to put my own suffering in a wider perspective, and to understand how people got through worse things, and to honor not only my own experience but to try to testify in some small way to human suffering. It couldn't just be me. That's why I went to those books and to other people.

RG: The poems are compelling, moving, but also fun in the way your poems are always fun. They somehow manage to keep the playfulness going in the face of these traumatic images.

AF: That's good to hear, because when I talk about it, it sounds like “Oh God, who would want to read that?” So you're saying something really important about what art does. It's that mediation, that cushioning. Language itself is the screen, it's something palpable we put between us and what happened. It allows us to bear it, to look at it. It's not too blinding. It's as if the blank page were blinding and then you can put the words on it and somehow you have a screen, something that mediates. Humor is great for when you're suffering. In Irish American culture, there's always a joke at the funeral, there's always humor. That's how you get yourself through it. So I'm glad if at times in the book there could be something ironic or funny or sharp—not just dreary.

RG: It's full of surprises. There's nothing ritualized about these poems, although there are all kinds of rituals that go along with mourning and trauma. You keep reinventing the very nature of elegy and elegiac language.

AF: Thank you, that's a huge compliment. I think ritual is an interesting word to bring to bear on this. I noticed I was writing a lot about rituals, about occasions, holidays, communal celebration. Mourning and trauma is so solitary. You can never tell anybody, you can talk forever and it's just never gonna get there, it's an infinite regress, recursive. So that's very solitary and lonely. And naturally I began to think of community, and how we create occasions, or try to, that sometimes are good, sometimes work, and sometimes are just pitiful. When I was reading about Stalinist Russia, I learned that police states have all these enforced celebrations, where people were made to go out and have parades, made to go out and sing. That was one kind of attempt at being communal. But then I began thinking about our own culture, and I have everything in here from Valentine's Day to the apple festival. I was really drawn to these moments of ritualized celebration, and whether we win or we lose or we fail. There's birthdays—“You Own It” is a birthday poem. New Year's Eve is another sort of occasion—we try to have a day when we say okay, fresh start, this is a blank slate, and we all celebrate together and make it new.

(from “Forcible Touching”)

Flaying the blank. The crayon in a death grip, rubbing it in. This coloring book, the Grief Counselor said, will help. It is a good idea to never tell the child the deceased went on a trip. Never tell the child the deceased is sleeping. It is a good idea to not be afraid. While the child colors Once upon a time there was a happy little chipmunk named Chipper who liked to play with his sibling it is good to say it is normal and even. To stamp out fantasies.

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(from “You Own It”)

For your birthday, I'm learning to pop champagne corks with a cossack sword when all you asked for was world peace. I'm actioning the deliverables to wish you many happy returns of the ecstasies that are imminent when all you requested was a contentment so quiet it's inaudible. Remember when I gave you a robe of black silk that floats and does not rustle? When all you desired was to turn from what was finished and hard in the darkness. And when you said I gave you what I wanted myself I gave you what I didn't want: gift certificates to spas that wax hearts, a blind date with the inventor of friction. Today I bring an actual-size sunrise and many glow words from the inmates of this late-stage civilization who navigate in your slipstream and to whom you say keep rowing.

RG: I've always thought of you as a celebratory poet, and I was glad to see that impulse was still there in spite of the grief and horror you recount. Some poets would say, I'm going to make this a completely dark book so that it's all of a piece, consistent, uniform; that can be deadly.

AF: I would never want to do that. I don't like anything that's too consistent. It wasn't going to be just telling the story of how my mother died. I guess that's why I began reading about trauma, thinking about what other people have been through. Maybe a good example is the poem “Forcible Touching” in the second section. It's not about my mother. There's this artifact I kept. One of my young nieces died, and at the funeral her little sister was given this awful coloring book, where you could color scenes from the funeral. The persona was a bear or something—I changed it to a chipmunk. I thought if they gave me that as a child I would have been so traumatized. I actually have the coloring book, and when I was writing about this I thought, I've had it for ten years—now is the time. So I took it out and began looking at it and thinking about how the obsessiveness of trauma is like the act of coloring in the book—you stay in the lines, you keep rubbing the color over the page. And so that artifact led me to write that poem, “Forcible Touching.” Part of the forcible touching, of course, was the coloring, the act of memory itself being a kind of forced touching. There's a lot of that in the book, and a lot of attempts to try to come to terms with what happened. I wanted to do justice to my mother and I never did. All I could do was myself, finally.
Kevin Attell

Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction
(Fordham University Press, 2014)

Agamben’s thought has been viewed as descending primarily from the work of Heidegger, Benjamin, and, more recently, Foucault. This book complicates and expands that constellation by showing how throughout his career Agamben has consistently and closely engaged (critically, sympathetically, polemically, and often implicitly) the work of Derrida as his chief contemporary interlocutor.

Carole Boyce Davies

Caribbean Spaces: Escapes from Twilight Zones
(University of Illinois Press, 2013)

Professor Boyce Davies’ recent book is both a memoir and a scholarly study exploring the multivalent meanings of Caribbean space and community in a cross-cultural and transdisciplinary perspective. She demonstrates how a Caribbean perspective has linked her political vision to broader currents of the Black World including the Civil Rights Movement, the environmental catastrophes of Haiti, the failure of the New Orleans levees during Hurricane Katrina, and the use of modern technologies such as smartphones and global positioning systems within the Caribbean.

Cathy Caruth

Literature in the Ashes of History
(Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013)

Cathy Caruth juxtaposes the writings of psychoanalysts, literary and political theorists, and literary authors who write in a century faced by a new kind of history, one that is made up of events that seem to undo, rather than produce, their own remembrance. At the heart of each chapter is the enigma of a history that, in its very unfolding, seems to be slipping away before our grasp. What does it mean for history to disappear? And what does it mean to speak of a history that disappears? These questions, Caruth suggests, lie at the center of the psychoanalytic texts that frame this book, as well as the haunting stories and theoretical arguments that resonate with each.

Lamar Herrin

Fractures: A Novel
(Thomas Dunne Books, 2013)

The Joyner family sits atop prime Marcellus Shale. When landmen for the natural gas companies begin to lease property all around the family’s hundred acres, the Joyners start to take notice. Undecided on whether or not to lease the family land, Frank Joyner must weigh his heirs’ competing motivations. All of this culminates as a looming history of family tragedy resurfaces. A sprawling family novel, Fractures follows each Joyner as the controversial hydrofracking issue slowly exacerbates underlying passions and demons.

George Hutchinson, editor

American Cocktail: A “Colored Girl” in the World by Anita Reynolds
(Harvard University Press, 2014)

This is the rollicking, never-before-published memoir of a fascinating woman with an uncanny knack for being in the right place in the most interesting times. Of racially mixed heritage, Anita Reynolds was proudly African American but often passed for Indian, Mexican, or Creole. Actress, dancer, model, literary critic, psychologist, but above all free-spirited provocateur, she was, as her Parisian friends nicknamed her, an “American cocktail.”
Drawing on fifteen years of work, See You in Paradise is the fullest expression yet of J. Robert Lennon's distinctive and brilliantly comic take on the pathos and surreality at the heart of American life. In Lennon's America, a portal to another universe can be discovered with surprising nonchalance in a suburban backyard, adoption almost reaches the level of blood sport, and old pals return from the dead to steal your girlfriend. Sexual dysfunction, suicide, tragic accidents, and career stagnation all create surprising opportunities for unexpected grace in this full-hearted and mischievous depiction of those days (weeks, months, years) we all have when things just don't go quite right.

In 1981 Alison Lurie published The Language of Clothes, a meditation on costume and fashion as an expression of history, social status and individual psychology. Amusing, enlightening and full of literary allusion, the book was highly praised and widely anthologized. Now Lurie has returned with a companion book, The Language of Houses, a lucid, provocative and entertaining look at how the architecture of buildings and the spaces within them both reflect and affect the people who inhabit them. Schools, churches, government buildings, museums, prisons, hospitals, restaurants, and of course, houses and apartments—all of them speak to human experience in vital and varied ways.

To the previous books of Court of Memory—Crossroads, The Stranger at the Crossroads, and Stories from My Life with the Other Animals—The Complete Court of Memory adds A Song of One’s Own, composed of narratives created from memory that have appeared in magazines but not collected until now.

Looking at a range of high and popular works of grief—including elegies, eulogies, epistles to the dead, funerals, and obituaries—Woubshet identifies a unique expression of mourning that emerged in the 1980s and early 1990s in direct response to the AIDS catastrophe...An innovative and moving study, The Calendar of Loss illuminates how AIDS mourning confounds and traverses how we have come to think about loss and grief, insisting that the bereaved can confront death in the face of shame and stigma in eloquent ways that also imply a fierce political sensibility and a longing for justice.

Professor Zacher explores how the very earliest English Biblical poetry creatively adapted, commented on and spread Biblical narratives and traditions to the wider population. She surveys the manuscripts of surviving poems, and shows how these vernacular poets commemorated the Hebrews as God’s “chosen people” and claimed the inheritance of that status for Anglo-Saxon England.
Retirements

Last spring saw the retirement of three stalwart members of the English department faculty.

Laura Donaldson came to Cornell in 2000, after teaching at Antioch College and the University of Iowa. A specialist in Native American and postcolonial literature, Laura also taught courses on the Bible as literature. Her scholarly work often focuses on the encounter between indigenous spirituality and Christianity. At Cornell she served as faculty coordinator of the Mellon Mays Fellowship Program, which provides support for minority students considering academic careers, was a faculty fellow at Akwe:kon House, and served as Director of Graduate Studies in the American Indian Program and Director of Undergraduate Studies in English. In 2008 she received the Paul Award for Excellence in Advising. She now devotes herself to her business, Four Paws, Four Directions Dog Training and Behavior Consulting, which draws on the Native American concept of Four Sacred Directions.

Molly Hite joined the English department in 1982. Her books include studies of Thomas Lynchon and experimental fiction by women, and two novels: Class Porn, an academic satire, and Breach of Immunity, a police procedural centered on the AIDS crisis. Her recent scholarship has focused on the Bloomsbury Circle. During her tenure at Cornell, Molly taught a wide range of classes on modernism and postmodernism, and initiated a popular course, “The Great American Cornell Novel,” that continues to be taught. She received the Russell Distinguished Teaching Award in 1994. From 2006 to 2008 she served as chair of the English department, overseeing a surge in hiring that included seven new colleagues in a single year. She now resides in the Seattle area, where she cultivates her love of gardens and opera.

Katherine Gottschalk (known to all her colleagues as Katy) began teaching at Cornell in 1980. For most of her time here, she also served as an administrator in the John S. Knight Program for Writing in the Disciplines, eventually holding the title of Walter C. Teagle Director of First-Year Writing Seminars. Everyone who taught freshman writing seminars under Katy’s supervision (which means all English faculty and graduate students, among others) appreciated the good humor and cheerfulness with which she maintained the high standards of that program. Early on, she established herself as a superb teacher with a special interest in autobiography, memoir, and the personal essay, winning a Clark Distinguished Teaching Award in 1982. Her book The Elements of Teaching Writing (2004), co-authored with Keith Hjortshoj, has been an invaluable resource for instructors at Cornell and beyond. David Faulkner, Katy’s successor as Walter C. Teagle Director of First-Year Writing Seminars, commented: “I will make it the business of my life to try to live up to Katy’s example. Whenever I face any uncertainty, I ask, “What would Katy do?”

The Gottschalk Memorial Lecture Series

The brilliant Renaissance scholar Paul Gottschalk, author of The Meanings of Hamlet (1972), taught at Cornell until his untimely death in 1977 at the age of 38. His family and colleagues established a lecture series in his memory, which allows the English department to bring a major scholar of pre-1800 British literature to Cornell each year to deliver a lecture and lead a seminar. Among the distinguished speakers to have delivered the Gottschalk lecture are John Hollander (1981), J. Hillis Miller (1984), Stanley Cavell (1991), Margaret Ferguson (1993), Annabel Patterson (1995), Marjorie Garber (1997), Stanley Fish (1998), Stephen Greenblatt (2001), Harry Berger Jr. (2003), Anne Middleton (2003), and Roland Greene (2008). Maureen Quilligan will give this fall’s Gottschalk Lecture. For over three and a half decades, this extraordinary series has greatly enriched Cornell’s literary culture. We are extremely grateful to Katy Gottschalk for her generous support of this series.
I designed English 2350 Literature and Medicine with the goal of expanding the constituency of students taking courses in the English Department. I especially aimed to bring students working in the sciences into conversation with students already immersed in the humanities, inviting them to reflect on the relationships among disciplines. In both 2013 and 2014, it attracted students from a wide range of majors (including English)—perhaps above all because it poses a fundamentally ethical question that crosses disciplinary divides: how to attend to and alleviate suffering.

As we discuss on the first day of this class, “literature and medicine” is becoming a new academic field structured by two distinct approaches to literature. In the “medical humanities”—a subfield currently beginning to flourish in medical schools—there has been widespread interest in the moral education of doctors. The medical humanities aims to help doctors recognize that health is defined by culture and institutions, so that they might treat patients more holistically and compassionately. So what is the role of literature here? The medical humanities hopes that reading literature can teach compassion, forwarding the fundamental ethical question that crosses disciplinary divides: how to attend to and alleviate suffering.

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Using these lenses together can achieve a balance between the medical humanities approach and the interdisciplinary one. On the first day, we read Thom Gunn’s 1995 poem “The Man with the Night Sweats”:

I wake up cold, I who
Prospered through dreams of heat
Wake to their residue,
Sweat, and a clinging sheet.

My flesh was its own shield:
Where it was gashed, it healed.

I grew as I explored
The body I could trust
Even while I adored
The risk that made robust,

A world of wonders in
Each challenge to the skin.

I cannot but be sorry
The given shield was cracked,
My mind reduced to hurry,
My flesh reduced and wrecked.

I have to change the bed,
But catch myself instead
Stopped upright where I am
Hugging my body to me
As if to shield it from
The pains that will go through me,

As if hands were enough
To hold an avalanche off.
From: Selected Poems (Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2009)

Right away, we see that the referential lens doesn’t reveal much, given the absence of medical or scientific terminology. Students do not guess that the poem might depict the experience of living with AIDS, but once I introduce that possibility, we begin to discuss the effect of not referring to it. Gunn substitutes for a highly stigmatized disease a potentially universal experience. I also note that the bio-
graphical lens similarly reveals little—at least on the face of it. Who is speaking in the poem, and can this be identified with the author himself? All we can be sure of is that the speaker voices suffering and ponders his past self, with an emphasis on the pleasure of risk. I share with students that Gunn’s poem isn’t autobiographical, but the poet lost many of his friends to AIDS in the 1980s and 1990s. This first-person poem, then, speaks of the fear others might experience when alone. So the speaker’s feeling of profound isolation is undone by the construction of the poem, which attempts to inhabit another’s skin. Finally, then, students are prepared to discuss how the poem reflects on the construction of AIDS. Although the body is figured through a military metaphor (common in representations of pain), the poem suggests that the skin is not a boundary that can be fully protected—that it is an open and porous surface that cannot be fully insulated against risk. This constitutes a critical reflection on pervasive attitudes toward the transmission of HIV in the United States at this time.

Students observe that the form of the poem also helps to reject the idea that AIDS should be attributed to risky behavior by noting the tidy rhymes and monosyllabic diction of the poem. The poem treads carefully, not riskily. Finally, students notice the hands at the end of the poem don’t seem like the speaker’s own as they wrap around his body. The individual’s hands become like a community’s hands, suggesting the need for a protective community rather than prophylaxis. The poem doesn’t claim to offer a solution to individual or social crisis, but yields a temporary opening up of optimism in this closing image. Though the final “as if” seems hopeful, students note that the final rhyme, “enough / off” doesn’t quite work. We consider this a signal that even though a poem cannot “hold the avalanche off,” it allows illness to be understood in a new way.

Moving forward from this kind of reading, the course proceeds through four conceptual sections. In the first section, “The Body in Pain,” we read accounts of the relationship between suffering and language, focusing on how literary texts attempt to account for what Elaine Scarry has called the “language-destroying” quality of pain. In poems by Emily Dickinson, Walt Whitman, Adrienne Rich, and many others, as well as prose essays by authors from Adam Smith to Virginia Woolf to Leslie Jamison, we consider literary strategies for depicting pain, focusing especially on the use of metaphors. When does illness become a way of talking about something else? When do we need to talk about something else in order to capture an experience of suffering? Who faces the greatest barriers to speaking about pain? The second section, “Doctor Figures,” explores the moral ambiguities and imbalances of power in medical practice as depicted in short fiction as well as Ian McEwan’s novel, Saturday. The third, “Medicalizing Sex,” offers a historically focused analysis of the creation of medical categories and the management of social power as we track the concept of hysteria from a nineteenth-century physiological diagnosis to a twentieth-century psychological one. Relations of power also underlie in the fourth section, “The Plague,” where we turn to the idea of communicable disease as a social metaphor, reading Camus’s The Plague and Kushner’s Angels in America as texts that reflect on the political conditions of community and belonging.

Many students come to this course captivated by the notion that science is perfectible, that medical progress will increasingly enable cures and gradually cease perpetuating social inequities. I strive not to fully disenchant this idea, but draw attention to how much language matters to how we conceive of our own biological lives. So often, in a literary context, to attend to our bodies is to attend to our own vulnerability and imperfection. Thus, I imagine the course to create a kind of critical pause in the pursuit of medical knowledge for many students—a pause in which they consider what healing might mean as well as where concepts of health and illness come from and who articulates them.
Cushing Strout
April 19, 1923-November 21, 2013
A member of the English department since 1964, Cushing Strout held the Ernest I. White Chair of American Studies and Humane Letters from 1975 until his retirement. He wrote many scholarly essays and books on American intellectual and literary history, including The Pragmatic Revolt in American History: Carl L. Becker and Charles A. Beard (1958), a pioneering study on Becker and Beard’s economic readings of constitutional history, and Making American Tradition: Visions & Revisions from Ben Franklin to Alice Walker (1990).

As a scholar, Cushing was a man of remarkable erudition. His range of reading, understanding, and recalling seemed to span any topic remotely related to the burgeoning discipline of American Studies. He was equally well informed and passionate about magic. Not only was he able to perform multiple tricks, but he also knew the history of each one and the best way to perform it according to books written by professional magicians. Even the scholar even while pursuing his hobbies, he published a book on close-up card magic in 2005. Similarly, Cushing was not content to be a gifted and enthusiastic tennis player. He knew the history of the game and studied the strokes and tactics of those who dominated the sport in different eras. He loved detective fiction, though he was not fond of the most recent adaptations on PBS of Sherlock Holmes. His last published work was a review of a book about Sherlock Holmes in the Summer 2013 Sewanee Review.

Cushing thought of himself first and foremost as a family man, father of three sons (Nathaniel, Benjamin, and Nicholas), and husband of Jean with whom he shared more than sixty-five years of marriage. Their first date, by Jean’s bemused recollection, was “a romantic moonlit night” sitting on a rocky shore where they discussed the problem of free will and determinism. Thus began a conversation that continued through 65 years of marriage. His beloved Jean remained steadily at his side until the end.

He was also a loyal and valued friend. Even in his final months, he responded to those who visited him with graciousness and good humor. Throughout the progression of his illnesses, he welcomed visitors, greeting them with a characteristic grin and soon launching into a discussion of the books he was reading or the reviews he was writing. Cushing’s life was celebrated at a touching memorial service on March 2, 2014 at Kendal Auditorium, which hundreds attended. Friends and family spoke eloquently about this man who was a wonderful parent, teacher, scholar, colleague, and human being.

Contributors: Howard Feinstein, Peter D. McClelland, Krishna Ramanujan, and Daniel R. Schwarz

Phyllis Janowitz
March 9, 1930-August 17, 2014
Poet and Professor Emerita of English Phyllis Janowitz taught creative writing and poetry at Cornell for nearly 30 years, and served as director of the Creative Writing Program twice. She retired as a full professor in 2009. Colleagues remembered Janowitz fondly for her generosity, sense of humor, and creative talents. “Phyllis was one of the funniest and kindest people I’ve ever known,” said her former student Alice Fulton, MFA ’82, the Ann S. Bowers Professor of English. “She had a delicious sense of the absurd and a warm heart, an unusual combination. Her poetry exhibits these qualities; on the page, as in the world, she was an original. Phyllis’ work was brilliantly eccentric, and its singularity made it an important influence for me and for countless other poets.” Kenneth McClane, the W.E.B. Du Bois Professor of Literature Emeritus, said: “Phyllis was a wonderful presence, one of our finest poets and, just as importantly, one of the most generous people I have ever known. Writers can be self-involved and too concerned only about their own advancement. Phyllis, in her wonderfully zany way, celebrated everyone with whom she came in contact. No one was ugly or immaterial in her universe. We shall all miss her terribly.”


Culmination by Phyllis Janowitz

The race is not over, yet the prize beyond which no other exists belongs to one of us; oh do not ask what is it, is it voluminous, is it exquisite, put your hand in the cloth bag and draw. You too have been given, or will be, a parcel of absurdity: not half a diary, not last year’s calendar with a weeping farm girl on the cover, Each prize presenting no fiscal wherewithal at all, nothing like that, each prize of the crudest design and material, fitted to each individual shoulder, arm pit and thigh, your reward for loping, loping through fragile days and nights, past tobacco barns, a goat and three chickens, a landscape you have colored with blue and green crayons a leaf at a time. In one corner, a brown house, smoke curling from a chimney; behind red curtains uncertain faces wait to be erased. The white dresser with a missing knob will also disappear, and the maple four-poster. You are bedeceived as a cake, but dry, too stiff to speak. Your lips are straight.

Have you been running your life for this, for this? This lack of excess, this nudity, bliss, this bliss.

from Temporary Dwellings (Pitt Poetry Series, 1988)

Philip Marcus
December 1, 1941-January 10, 2015
A specialist in modern literature, Phil Marcus taught at Cornell from 1967 to his retirement in 1995. He published and edited important studies of William Butler Yeats, and was co-general editor of the Cornell Yeats Series, an edition of manuscript materials that currently runs to thirty volumes. He held a number of administrative positions at Cornell, including Director of Graduate Studies, Director of the Summer Writing Program, and faculty advisor of the men’s lacrosse team. After leaving Cornell, he became a tenured full professor at Florida International University, where he won two University Faculty Awards for Excellence in Teaching. His colleague and friend Dan Schwartz recalls him as “a dedicated teacher and a witty man who loved words (especially puns), reading, and the books that he knew almost by heart.”

Jon Stallworthy
January 18, 1935-November 19, 2014
The eminent poet, critic, and textual scholar Jon Stallworthy was the John Wendell Anderson Professor in the English department from 1979 to 1988, when he joined the faculty of Oxford University. Professor Stallworthy published twelve volumes of poetry, most recently War Poet (2014). He edited numerous anthologies, including A Book of Love Poetry (1974) and The Oxford Book of War Poetry (1984), and served as co-editor of both The Norton Anthology of English Literature and The Norton Anthology of Poetry. Among his scholarly works are an important study of Yeats’s poetic manuscripts and a biography of the World War I poet Wilfred Owen, on whom Stallworthy was considered the leading authority. Professor Stallworthy’s most recent visit to Cornell came on the occasion of M. H. Abrams’s 100th birthday, when he gave a memorable reading of Henry Reed’s war poem “Naming of Parts.”
Remembering Mike Abrams
July 23, 1912–April 21, 2015

Class of 1916 Professor Emeritus M. H. Abrams, known to friends, colleagues and students as Mike, died in April at the age of 102. Our 2013 issue includes an account of the many tributes and festivities that took place on the occasion of his 100th birthday, which also saw the publication of his book *The Fourth Dimension of a Poem*.

He continued to receive recognition for his superlative achievements as a scholar, editor, and teacher. Last July, Mike traveled to the White House to receive the National Humanities Medal from President Obama. The official citation read:

M. H. Abrams. Literary critic, for expanding our perceptions of the Romantic tradition and broadening the study of literature. As a professor, writer, and critic, Dr. Abrams has traced the modern concept of artistic self-expression in Western culture, and his work has influenced generations of students.

Shortly after the White House ceremony, a few of Mike’s colleagues and friends gathered at his home to congratulate him and belatedly celebrate his 102nd birthday. Paul Sawyer presented Mike with a beautifully composed and meticulously executed drawing he had made of Mike surrounded by the great Romantic poets Coleridge, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Wordsworth, and Blake. (Mike observed that since he was the only one in the drawing laughing, he must have just told a joke.)

As a heavy rain fell on the glass roof of his sunroom, Mike was prevailed upon to read one of his favorite poems, Keats’s “To Autumn,” which he did with his usual grace and eloquence. His pleasure in Keats’s artistry is evident in the photograph on the back of this newsletter. Anyone who would like to experience Mike’s matchless readings of poetry can do so by searching on YouTube or CornellCast for several versions of a lecture he gave, variously entitled “The Fourth Dimension of a Poem” and “On Reading Poems Aloud.” Recordings of Abrams reading Romantic poems can also be found on the website for the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*.

Mike Abrams with Barack and Michelle Obama after receiving the National Humanities Medal at the White House, July 28, 2014.


A memorial gathering for Mike Abrams will be held at Cornell on September 12th at 2pm in Statler Auditorium.
Letter from the Chair

(These remarks were delivered at a memorial service for Mike Abrams at Kendal of Ithaca on May 30.)

I'm here to represent the Cornell English department, which was Mike's professional home for seven decades. But I'm also here because Mike Abrams has been a part of my life literally since I could walk, and even before. My parents both attended Cornell, my mother as an undergraduate, my father as a graduate student, and as a small boy in Queens I remember frequently hearing the name Mike Abrams spoken with a mixture of reverence and affection. Other Cornell teachers were occasionally mentioned, but it was clear to me that Abrams was the great one, the shaping spirit. Indeed I think I must have mentally associated him with the legendary figures in my picture books—Paul Bunyan, Hercules, Batman. Something about him was larger than life.

Many years later as an undergraduate at Yale I finally laid eyes on the legend, when he gave a lecture on Wordsworth's great poem "A Slumber Did My Spirit Seal." I'll never forget hearing Mike read that poem—quietly, without histrionics, but with total command over every shade of sound and meaning. To this day I consider Mike Abrams to be the finest reader of poetry I've ever known, and it was a gift to all of us that he devoted his last years to sharing his insights into this neglected art. One of the last times I saw Mike was when a small group of friends gathered at his cottage to congratulate him upon his return from the White House. I asked him to read us Keats's "To Autumn," which he did with great relish, savouring every vowel and consonant. My wife Gina took a picture of Mike beaming with pleasure at Keats's virtuoso manipulation of what he called "the fourth dimension of a poem." I keep that photo on my desk to remind me what the love of poetry looks like at its purest.

Given the history I've recounted, you can imagine what a daunting prospect it was for me to become Mike's colleague in 1987. Of course I quickly discovered that he was the most genial of titans. Friendly and gracious, he immediately put me at my ease, as I would see him do with many other young professors and graduate students over the years. Gradually, I also came to understand the more hidden, but crucial role he had played in forging a sense of intellectual community in a department where not everyone marched to the same drummer. And this brings me to my real theme this afternoon. I realize this is not a scholarly occasion, but I want to say a few words about Mike Abrams the scholar, and what his scholarship tells us about the kind of man he was.

As a scholar, Mike was of course best known for his 1953 book The Mirror and the Lamp, ranked 25 in the Modern Library's list of 100 greatest non-fiction books of the 20th century. Not only is The Mirror and the Lamp a great book, it's also a great title—perhaps the most suggestive and memorable ever given to a work of literary criticism. As Mike cheerfully acknowledged, he cribbed the title from Yeats (whom he actually knew at Cambridge in the 30s—what a staggering thought that is!). But where Yeats wrote "the mirror [must] turn lamp," implicitly privileging lamp over mirror, Abrams characteristically placed the two terms in balanced equipoise. Indeed one could say that the most important word in his title is the conjunction "and." That word, I'd like to suggest, lay at the heart of Mike's intellectual temperament and moral character.

Mike embodied the spirit of "and." He was a human conjunction, a connecter, a bridge of gaps. The Mirror and the Lamp weighs the competing claims of mimetic and expressive theories of art while showing how intricately intermeshed they became in the Romantic period. His other monumental work of criticism, Natural Supernaturalism, maps the generative space between theological and secular forms of imagination. Though he acknowledges the elements of conflict and critique at work in these historical shifts, Mike never framed his stories in terms of heroes and villains. He may have been a Romanticist at heart, but he showed great respect for the classical and Christian values that the Romantics sought to displace or transform. He knew that great works of literature can arise out of many different value systems, and he had no interest in elevating some at the expense of others.

This, of course, is what made him such a great anthologist. Along with his two critical masterpieces, Mike's most enduring legacy is the Norton Anthology of English Literature, itself two volumes joined by an implied "and." (Indeed the gap between them falls in roughly the same spot as the turn from mirror to lamp.) While Mike served as period editor for the Romanticism section, his more important role was as general editor, in which capacity he saw to it that every period shone with equal glory. A pluralist to the core, he was committed to editorial principles of inclusion, representativeness, and range, entrusting readers and teachers with the freedom to trace their own pathways through the labyrinth.

A similar spirit informs Mike's other major pedagogical work, A Glossary of Literary Terms, which gathers and explains critical concepts with the same ecumenical thoroughness and lucidity. Mike's insistence that both works be continually updated and revised reflected his awareness that even the most authoritative of scholarly maps are fallible, subject to the vagaries of history. Many other examples of Mike's penchant for magisterial cartography can be adduced. In The Mirror and the Lamp he famously identifies four "coordinates of art criticism," one of his most influential essays maps "Five Types of 'Lycidas';" and his very last lecture charts four dimensions of a poem, dwelling on the fourth without in any way demoting the other three.

The spirit of "and" extended well beyond Mike's published scholarship, of course. He bridged and conjoined many realms in the course of his long career. Simply by dint of arriving at Cornell when he did, and staying around as long as he did, he bridged the university's past and present. In his younger years he had known some of Cornell's most important early figures, like his English department colleague Frederick Prescott, who Mike credited with sowing the seeds of modern criticism. He bridged generations of faculty, recognizing in the energy of youth a crucial source of renewal even when it challenged the pieties of the elders. He bridged intellectual factions, treating ideas with curiosity and respect even when he found them unconvincing. He bridged the worlds of specialized scholarship and undergraduate teaching, the seminar and the lecture hall. He bridged the gap between scholars and writers: at a time when creative writing was still struggling for academic respectability, Mike befriended and championed colleagues like Vladimir Nabokov, Jim McConkey, Archie Ammons.

He bridged the realms of literature and other arts: he was an eclectic art collector, an avid concertgoer, and an amateur musician. And of course he bridged the world of academics and athletics, attending every Cornell home football game since 1945.

Losing Mike Abrams, we've lost something like a keystone, the piece that holds all the other pieces together at the apex of the arch. His name will continue, of course, memorialized in prizes and professorships as well as in his indelible works of scholarship. But we will also need to invoke and emulate his conjunctive, bridging spirit if we want to preserve his legacy for the future.

Roger Gilbert
Professor and Chair
August 2, 2014, Mike Abrams reading Keats to friends who had gathered to congratulate him on receiving the National Humanities Medal. Photo by Gina Campbell.