

in progress...

Volume 1, Issue 1
November 2002

The Department of English Newsletter

Welcome to **in progress...**, a periodic report of the scholarly, creative, and professional activities of the English Department faculty at Harper College. The newsletter will be published approximately twice a semester, and feature the work of four faculty members per issue.

The print version of the newsletter will offer excerpts of faculty work. For extended versions of these excerpts, please visit the English Department website at <http://www.harpercollege.edu/libarts/eng/dept/inprogress>

Vietnam Poems: East and West

Andrew Wilson will be presenting "Nationalism vs. Un-Nationalism: Vietnam and American Poems About the Vietnam Conflict" at the Association of Third World Studies Annual Conference in Taiwan, 28-30 December 2002. The following is the abstract of Professor Wilson's presentation:

Over the past twenty years, certain American poets have written/published some eye-opening, heart-breaking poems on the Vietnam-America conflict. In particular, Bruce Weigl and Yusef Komunyakaa—two renowned contemporary poets who are also veterans of America's war with North Vietnam—have written movingly about their war-time and post-war experiences. The poems of Weigl and Komunyakaa, while neither hopeless nor altogether irate in tone, are nevertheless charged with regret and loss; this, in fact, is the standard in much of the literature (poetry and otherwise) produced in America, by Americans, about the Vietnam War. Like Weigl and Komunyakaa, some Vietnamese writers have also composed beautiful poems of deep sorrow about the Vietnam-America conflict; of course they have. However, a sizable portion of Vietnamese-authored poems about the war are graceful tributes to the principle of endurance and, quite often, the principle of steady, immutable patriotism. In my paper, I seek to do two things: 1) illustrate (with examples) the way(s) in which the war-related poems written by Americans differ noticeably from the Vietnamese-authored poems about the war, and 2) suggest a handful of reasons why the Vietnamese writers (from the South

fore the fall of Saigon -- wrote about the war with more optimism and pride than American writers.

(To read more of Prof. Wilson's paper, see <http://www.harpercollege.edu/libarts/eng/dept/inprogress>)

Y.W.O.E.S.

Rich Johnson is a contributor to the "Year's Work in Old English Studies," an annual publication of the Old English Newsletter which is produced through the MLA. As the editor of the "General and Miscellaneous Subjects" section of Y.W.O.E.S., he reads between 70 and 100 essays, notes, newspaper articles, chapters, and/or books on Anglo-Saxon subjects from beekeeping practices to manuscript dating, and then summarizes them for the benefit of other researchers in Anglo-Saxon studies. The following is an excerpt from his recent contribution and represents his general approach to the entries:

David Hill, "The Bayeux Tapestry and its Commentators: The Case of Scene 15" (Medieval Life 11: 24-26), reconsiders modern interpretations of the scene in which a priest touches the face of a woman who is ensconced beneath a decorated archway. The inscription, "UBI UNUS CLERICUS ET ÆLFGYVA," is seemingly unhelpful. The conventional interpretation, based primarily on a marginal nude figure beneath the scene whose demeanor mimics that of the cleric and the phallic imagery of a nearby tower, has focused on some purported sexual scandal. Hill argues that this sexualized interpretation ignores the narrative unity of the Tapestry. In a brilliant application of the principle of Occam's Razor, Hill suggests that the scene does not represent a break from the narrative, but instead he links it to the previous scene (14) in which Harold is seen listening to William and pointing to the next scene (15). Hill argues that the two scenes together depict Harold's betrothal to William's daughter, Agatha. According to Hill, William is likely to have changed his daughter's name to Ælfgyva for this betrothal in a public gesture which would serve the dual purpose of honoring an important West Saxon royal name and, perhaps more significantly, underscore his own relation to the royal family of Wessex. William's aunt Emma was King Æthelraed's second wife and Edward the Confessor's mother. Hill points out that Emma changed her name to Ælfgyva when she married Æthelraed. Thus, Hill argues that scene 15 in fact depicts a priest going to the bower of the bride-to-be where he blesses her and the betrothal. Hill links the enigmatic inscription of scene 15 with that of scene 14 to read, "AD PALATI(U)S SUU(S) UBI UNUS CLERICUS ET ÆLFGYVA" ("to his palace where a

priest and Ælfgyva"). The value of Hill's reappraisal of the scene is that it restores the narrative continuity of scene 15 with its two neighboring scenes (14 and 16) and rescues "an innocent betrothal scene" (26) from its scandalized position in recent criticism.

In addition to work on Y.W.O.E.S., Prof. Johnson is working on a book-length study of St. Michael the Archangel in medieval England. The book consists of a detailed analysis of the literary sources, history, characteristics, and spread of the cult and legends of St. Michael from their origins in the literature of the Old and New Testament eras to their introduction in Anglo-Saxon England in the seventh century and following. In its focus on the cult of the Archangel in medieval England, the book analyzes the representations of St. Michael in medieval liturgy, literature, iconography, and church dedications.

Prof. Johnson will also be sponsoring and presiding over four sessions of papers at the International Congress on Medieval Studies at Western Michigan University in May, 2003. The sessions include "The Hagiography of Angels," "The Cult of St. Michael the Archangel in the Middle Ages," "Negotiating Sanctity in Medieval England: Before 1066," and "Negotiating Sanctity in Medieval England: After 1066." (To read more of Prof. Johnson's book manuscript, see <http://www.harpercollege.edu/libarts/eng/dept/inprogress>)

A Book of Her Own: Postmodern Practices in Contemporary Women Writer's Experimental Fiction

Seema Kurup's dissertation examines postmodernity as it is manifested in the fiction of the contemporary American women writers Louise Erdrich, Lorrie Moore, and Carole Maso. The following excerpt is taken from chapter one, "The Postmodern Tradition: From Theory to Aesthetic Practice":

In order to fully understand what the contemporary American women writers Louise Erdrich, Lorrie Moore, and Carole Maso are appropriating, extending, or revising in their novels, we must first see what the forebears of this type of writing were doing. To begin, I wish to offer a brief synopsis of several theorists and theories associated with "postmodernism" in order to establish the theoretical framework out of which postmodern writers emerged. Then, I move to "case studies," Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita*, John Barth's *Lost in the Funhouse*, and Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, to illustrate how the theories of postmodernism are manifest in three texts of the literary movement called "Postmodernism" in American literature. Thus, the section entitled "Postmodernism in Theory" offers a cursory account of several main ideas of postmodernism; "Postmodernism in Practice" shows the literary/aesthetic application of those ideas.

Of course, neither section is an exhaustive study, nor is meant to be. Instead, the purpose of the two following sections is twofold: one, to provide a context out of which the

discussion of postmodernism in the novels of Erdrich, Moore, and Maso can begin; two, to outline the literary project of the male writers of the movement, traditionally thought of as comprising the "Postmodern Canon," in order to serve as a comparison with the women writers in my study and to highlight these women's contribution to postmodernist fiction.

This chapter concludes with "Postmodernism Today," a discussion which serves to link the male postmodern writers to the female writers found in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. In this section, I outline some of the similarities found among the male and female writers and then delineate the ways in which the female writers depart from or extend the "traditional" postmodern project. I also cite research of postmodern theorists who claim that postmodernism is not simply a negative and deconstructive approach to literature but one that is affirming of "differences" and liberating. (To read more of Prof. Kurup's dissertation, see <http://www.harpercollege.edu/libarts/eng/dept/inprogress>)

Annie Davidovicz is the faculty editor of *Point of View*, a Liberal Arts Division publication that features the best fiction, poetry, and visual art produced by Harper students. "Commute" is one of Annie's recent poems.

Commute

Some days it seems
light hides inside
the bark of a dog.
Today, rust fur wrapping
gray pulls my eyes from the road.
Coyotes, like hitchikers, lope along the shoulder.
What, out here, lures them from the edge
of woods? One attacks a shadow of semi
slapping through dried winter
weeds. One leads
through a narrow slash of grass
toward nowhere that is good--
the towers, the airport, the tollbooth.

I long for their heavy fur
right now. Now, right here,
I could stop the car,
throw keys in the gutter and turn
toward the wild. Run clear
down the path where, soon, dark
moles, the length of arms, will tunnel
through earth. I cross into light,
listen for the bark,
and wave at the clouds
with red hands.

Editorial Staff:

**Kurt Neumann
Seema Kurup
Chris Padgett**