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PLEASE HELP SUPPORT MICHIGAN ENGLISH • POSTAGE-PAID ENVELOPE INSIDE
Dear Friends of the Department,

It is a particular pleasure to introduce myself to the community. I have been at the University of Michigan for 25 years. This was my first job out of graduate school, and I have never wanted to be anywhere else. It is one of the great honors of my life to be asked to be Chair. And it is one of the signal challenges of my life to be asked to be Chair at this difficult budgetary moment.

I want to begin by expressing gratitude to those who have come immediately before me. Sid Smith was at the helm of the department for 6 years of spectacular growth in quality and quantity. David Porter served as Interim Chair in the Fall of 2009 while I finished a book on Shakespeare's poetry. Both leave a well-run department, but both are tough acts to follow.

It is a pleasure to see that this issue of the newsletter celebrates Global English. We have come a long way from the days when English departments would actively discourage the teaching of American literature, or of anything written beyond the island borders of the United Kingdom. The phenomenon of Global English is particularly fascinating from the historical perspective of the Renaissance, the period in which I specialize. In the Renaissance, England was still something of a backwater nation, and English had not yet established its legitimacy as a national language and literature; the “global” language of that period was Latin. English writers could only hope that their language and literature would someday rival the far more developed vernaculars of France, Italy, and Spain.

This last year was an unprecedented year of national and international visibility for the department. I don’t think any department in the country has at the same time had among its members the president of the profession’s central organization—Sid Smith, currently the president of the Modern Language Association—and the editor of the profession’s flagship journal, PMLA (Patsy Yaeger). It was a year in which the Department achieved many distinctions across campus, and around the world; these achievements are too numerous to mention here, and I would encourage you to visit the department’s website to view the myriad accomplishments of this truly impressive group. I am pleased to note that David Halperin was named a Distinguished University Professor, one of the highest honors the University bestows. David assumes the title of the W. H. Auden Distinguished University Professor of the History and Theory of Sexuality. This year’s graduation ceremony gave all of us a thrill when our own Alexander Marston was chosen to speak at graduation alongside President Obama. Alex did a terrific job in this august company; his speech, along with his compelling account of this remarkable event, are included in this newsletter.

The MFA program continues to thrive, in large part because of the continuing generosity of Helen Zell. In the MFA Handbook, a book ranking graduate creative writing programs for prospective students, the entry on our program begins, “Without question, Michigan is one of the top three overall in America, and some would argue that in poetry it is presently the very best,”

MICHAEL SCHOENFELDT
DEPARTMENT CHAIR
and concludes, “In short, Michigan is quite nearly the perfect MFA program.” We now aspire to remove “quite nearly” from that sentence!

For better and worse, departments are always changing. As to the better: the department had seven successful promotion cases this year: Michael Byers, Khaled Mattawa, and Megan Sweeney were promoted to the rank of associate professor, with tenure. Gregg Crane, Eileen Pollack, Yopie Prins, and David Porter were promoted to the rank of full professor, with tenure.

I very pleased to report that Tung-Hui Hu will join the ranks of our tenure-track faculty after two more years in the Michigan Society of Fellows. He is being hired on one of the highly competitive cluster positions sponsored by the University of Michigan President’s Office. Hui-Hui, as he is called, specializes in the emerging field of Digital Humanities, and has a fascinating background: he has a Ph.D. from Berkeley in Rhetoric, and an MFA from Michigan in Creative Writing; but he also has a BA in Comparative Literature and Computer Science, and he spent several years in the world of Computer Science before returning to the academy.

The process of change entails departures as well as additions, and I am saddened to report the deaths of Professors Alan Howes, Robert (Tom) Lenaghan, and James Holman Robertson. As many of you know, in addition to serving as a faculty member, Alan helped found the New England Literature Program, a program which continues to thrive and to offer a transformative experience for students. Tom specialized in medieval literature and was one of the contributing editors to The Riverside Chaucer (1994) and the Norton Reader. James served the University of Michigan in many capacities, perhaps most significantly as Assistant Dean and as the first Director of the Residential College. All three had lengthy and distinguished tenures at the University and will be sorely missed.

The Department and its students have also been struggling to adjust to the impending retirement of Ralph Williams, our most celebrated teacher. On April 10, 2010, we held a symposium in Ralph’s honor entitled “Texts Sacred and Canonical: Their Circulation in Public Culture.” It was a profound and moving intellectual event, as was appropriate to Ralph’s illustrious career. We were blessed this year with a creative visitation by the Royal Shakespeare Company, in which the company developed three new plays in conversation with the University and the community. It was a galvanizing experience for all participants.

As a way of ensuring that Ralph’s extraordinary impact will be felt for many years to come, the Department of English has inaugurated the Ralph Williams Excellence in Teaching Award, designed to foster the careers of those individuals who, like Ralph, successfully reach a broad audience with their teaching. More information about this fund is available on both the back page of this newsletter and our website.

We remain extremely grateful for your continuing support of the department. Without your help, we would not be able to recruit and retain the best faculty, or to provide fellowships to attract the most promising students, particularly at this challenging budgetary moment. Sometimes literature seems like an unnecessary luxury or an irrelevant adornment at moments of economic distress. But it is at these times that the cultural value of imagining other perspectives, other countries, and other worlds—something literature is particularly capable of supplying—is at a premium. It is also at such times that the economically cheap but intellectually rich pleasures of well-wrought language are thrown into relief. My colleagues and I appreciate your abiding passion for the pleasures and challenges that literature offers.

NEW FACULTY INTRODUCTION

Clement Hawes received his Ph.D. from Yale University in 1986 and holds a joint position in History and English. He specializes in British literature and history 1660-1800, writing broadly about the problematic of periodizing the Enlightenment and more closely about such authors as Jonathan Swift, Laurence Sterne, Samuel Johnson, and Christopher Smart. One of his consistent interests has been in the literature of enthusiasm hark back to the English Revolution, which produced such unprecedented writers as John Bunyan and John Wesley. Another preoccupation has been with the cultural dynamics of early empire: the making of an imperial Britishness as that project informs historical narrative and explanation. In teasing out the promise of the British eighteenth century as a vantage point for critique, he has considered the postcolonial engagements of such contemporary authors as Salman Rushdie and Wole Soyinka. Recently he has expanded on a personal liking for travel by studying early modern travelogues. He is also coediting, with Robert Caserio, The Cambridge History of the English Novel.

BELOW: Recent publications by Clement Hawes: Europe Observed: Multiple Gazes in Early Modern Encounters (2008), coedited with Kumkum Chatterjee; and The British Eighteenth Century and Global Critique (2005).
From the beginning of the now decade-long collaboration between the Royal Shakespeare Company, the University of Michigan, and the University Musical Society, the relationship was to have two phases.

One was the spectacular series of performing residencies, which began with Michael Boyd’s epoch-making presentation of the first tetralogy (Henry VI, Parts 1, 2, 3, 2001); continued with Coriolanus, Merry Wives of Windsor, and a staged version of Salman Rushdie’s Midnight’s Children (2003); and most recently brought us Julius Caesar, Antony and Cleopatra, and The Tempest (2006). Each residency, produced by the UMS, lasted up to three weeks, and included not only the performances, but a rich educational program in which the cast, including such actors as Patrick Stewart and Harriet Walter, fanned out over the University, taking part in classes and in panel discussions, and over the area, visiting schools.

It was not, however, until this year that the second phase of the collaboration was begun. What had been planned from the first were Creative Projects in which members of the RSC would come to Ann Arbor and, over a period of weeks, work with faculty and students on productions scheduled or being considered for presentation in England and elsewhere, but still in a formative stage. This idea took brilliant form this last March and April when a group from the RSC and the LAByrinth Theater Company from New York came to Ann Arbor to work on three productions. One is a play by the distinguished British playwright David Edgar on the formation of the King James Version of the Bible (whose four-hundredth
It was a richly buoyant project, in which the RSC and LAByrinth drew on the deep intellectual resources of this University, and generously made us part of their work in process. They expressed deep gratitude for what this experience made possible in the development of their work. The U-M administration, especially President Coleman, who supported the project with a grant; Gary Krenz, Special Counsel to the President; Senior Vice-Provost Lester Monts; Dean Robert Dolan and Lynnette Iannace of the Ross School of Business Administration; and Dean Christopher Kendall of the School of Music, Theater, and Dance; as well as Ken Fischer, Head of the University Musical Society; and the University’s faculty and students; all these supported and variously became part of the creative process. Special thanks are also due to Michael Boyd, Artistic Director of the RSC, and to Jeremy Adams, the undauntable Producer for the RSC, who, along with Paula Muldoo of U-M, worked tirelessly in coordinating the Project. These last two sentences may read like the roll of credits at the end of a film, but “credit where credit is due” is the Michigan way.

The plays will be produced in England during 2011 and 2012, and many from the University and community are already hoping to see there the results to which this collaboration has contributed and in which they justly feel they have a genuine part. In the meantime, there is reasonable hope that we may have an interim report from the writers and the RSC on the progress of the productions.

anniversary is upcoming in 2011). A second production bids also to be of enormous power—Helen Edmundson’s drama focusing on the turbulent life of the seventeenth-century Mexican intellectual, writer, and nun, Sor Juana Inés de la Cruz, whom some judge to be among the significant figures in the literary and cultural development of this hemisphere. The third represents a daring attempt by Gregory Doran, one of the most distinguished of British directors, to bring to the stage The Double Falsehood of Lewis Theobald, an eighteenth-century writer who claimed he drew for this work—to a degree that cannot now be assessed—on Cardenio, a lost play by Shakespeare and Fletcher.

For nearly two weeks the group, which included writers, actors (among them Sir Anthony Sher), the RSC’s movement coach Struan Leslie, and its voice coach, Lyn Darnley, lived and worked on campus. There they developed the three productions, visited classes in Theater, English, History, and Dance, and consulted with faculty in these units as well as the School of Music. The Department of English mounted a mini-course, taught by Professors Toon and Tinkle, on the Bible and medieval drama. The Hatcher Library hosted a panel on the King James Version in conjunction with its exhibition drawn from its splendid holdings in the history of the Bible. Each of the plays received a reading and discussion (open to the University) of the scripts at their then-stage of development. Gregory Doran and Sir Anthony Sher discussed on stage what it is to act and direct for the stage and the screen, using clips from plays (Hamlet and Macbeth) that Doran directed in both media; Sir Anthony played Macbeth in both.
GLOBAL ENGLISH

INTRODUCTION

by Theresa Tinkle

“You don’t need to learn Greek. We need to learn English.”

The man who gave me my first lesson in Global English stood in a small dusty shop in the middle of a small dusty village deep in a remote valley on the island of Crete. Dominating the village square was a once-gorgeous Venetian clock tower, sign of long-ago conquest and present decay. The pirates who built the tower also built exquisite lighthouses and harbors on the coast, where they offloaded the booty before moving it to such remote valleys for safety; the towers and harbors punctuate a history of economic conquest. Just inside the shop was a battered Coca-Cola ice chest, a sign of more recent commercial influences. Along the road leading to the valley I passed a few road signs, never where I needed them and always printed in small Greek letters that were difficult to read at travelling speed. To get to the valley, I needed to know at least some Greek. I barely passed the test, and I certainly learned the limits of my Greek. At one point, lost, I asked for directions—in my version of Greek—from a woman riding a mule. Her smiling, voluble response went over my head, though I too smiled and responded as best I could.

To travel anywhere in the world today is to encounter the influence of English and to recognize the tensions between the local and the global. English has become a global language, the lingua franca of international air traffic control and the internet, and this fact has profound implications for a Department of English Language and Literature. What “English” means now encompasses the literatures of Britain and the United States, as well as South Africa, Wales, Syria, and countless other nations. The essays in this Newsletter—as well as the honors students’ statements—demonstrate the far-reaching implications of global English for the study of literature. Each faculty essay highlights the connections and disconnections between English and other languages, and hence between our own and other cultures. Each essay suggests the rich vitality and sometimes perplexing difficulties of literary multiculturalism. Global English presents new intellectual challenges. Michigan faculty and students are engaged in the kinds of study and artistic effort that will, I hope, help us to face the challenges honestly, with thoughtfulness, with a desire to understand the people we meet in our texts and travels and to discover with them our differences as well as our common humanity.
It remains to be seen what literary idiom(s) can adequately express the horror of turtles burned alive in the Gulf of Mexico, the as-yet-unstoppable flow from the ocean depths that is no more fathomable for being watchable on YouTube. The Moby Dick of the present—in which whales would feature not as ever-more-elusive floating oil reserves, but rather as collateral damage—has yet to be written.

In the Niger Delta, where riverine communities have been living for half a century in the shadow of petroleum extraction, evidence of environmental harm is all-too-visible in the unnatural sheen of polluted fields and creeks. And yet a vibrant literature has emerged from this devastation: poems and plays and prose fictions that link the spectacle of ecodisaster to other modes of petroviolence that encompass the Nigerian state, multinational oil companies, and consumers at gas pumps far away. In “Luxurious Hearse,” a short story by University of Michigan MFA alumnus Uwem Akpan, not only religion and ethnicity, but also regional differences in access to petroleum products and vulnerability to the costs of their extraction, are seen to be powerful obstacles to the ideal of Nigerian national unity. Akpan’s characters debate whether oil belongs to the ethnic minorities of the south, the political elites of the central government, or corporations with headquarters far away. What does it mean to imagine oil as the lifeblood of the nation, if it is so carelessly spilled in the Delta?

Ben Okri’s short story “What the Tapster Saw” depicts Nigerian petroviolence in a different literary mode. This “petro-magic-realism,” as I call it, joins petro-magic (oil economies’ illusion of wealth without work), with magical realism (the literary emergence of the fantastic amidst modernity and modernization). Okri’s story offers a phantasmagoric glimpse into a degraded landscape illuminated day and night by natural gas flares, “roseate flames [that] burned everywhere without consuming anything.” A talking snake glistens with the beautiful yet deadly iridescence of oil spilled on water; a bespectacled turtle serves as the protagonist’s Virgilian guide. Juxtapositions of bombs and bullets, coups and executions, with herbalists and witch-doctors, talking animals and masquerades, combine the transmogrifying creatures and liminal space of the forest in the Yoruba literary tradition with the monstrous-but-mundane violence of oil extraction.
exploration and extraction, the state violence that supports it, and the environmental degradation that it causes. Working against the empty globalism inherent in the rubric of magical realism, in which “magic” might name anything unfamiliar to a European or American reader, “petro-magic-realism” describes how a particular political ecology is represented through a particular literary idiom.

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Postcolonial critics have sought to understand the relationship between the history of European imperialism and its aftermath, on the one hand, and literature and culture, whether that of the imperial metropolis or the former colonies, on the other. In one important strand of postcolonial critique, “Third World” names not timeless poverty and backwardness but rather the possibility of autonomy and cooperation sought by newly independent nation-states in the mid-twentieth century, as an alternative to US-USSR rivalry. The Cold War, then, was hotly contested on distant battlefields in and for this Third World. If Louisiana disasters have evoked strange glimpses of the United States as “Third World,” then perhaps, in this latter, more radical sense of the term, we can begin to discern the global structures of inequality, the traffic lines of power, and the forms of violence (physical, economic, and ecological), that generally remain difficult to fathom, dispersed underwater, kept out of sight. Literature—whether from the Mississippi Delta or the Niger Delta—can fuel this kind of geographical imagining.

**Light and Dark**

Natural gas flares along the Niger Delta spew toxic smoke into the air, roar continuously like jet aircraft taking flight, and light night skies so brightly they can be spotted from space. In contrast, the oil spill in the Gulf of Mexico as seen from the International Space Station moves quietly, pushed about by tidal flows and watercraft, smoothing rougher waters with its weight and dulling the surface reflection of the Sun.

**CONFESSION TIME**

by Peter Ho Davies

At one point in my World-War-Two-era novel The Welsh Girl I have a German POW playing soccer and performing a “step-over,” the elegant and sinuous sleight of foot much on display at this summer’s World Cup. It’s a lovely feint which in its sway-hipped fluidity is a little reminiscent of a dance move, one reason I wanted to include it in the book, but as one sharp reader pointed out soccer balls and boots in the 1940’s were so heavy that the deft trick was essentially impossible.

Elsewhere I describe a character stopping at a British pub for a ploughman’s lunch, typically a simple meal of bread and cheese, with a pickled onion on the side perhaps, all ingredients readily available in the 1940’s (even under rationing) but, as it turns out, not known as a ploughman’s lunch until the 1960’s when the term was apparently coined by an ad-man as part of a promotion to boost sales of cheese.

Finally, at a crucial juncture, I have a Welsh character say nag oes, the Welsh for “no,” though, as another reader noted, the Welsh word should be spelled nag oes and means “no there isn’t.” Paid, which translates as “don’t,” would have been the better choice, apparently, in my context.

These are all errors, of course (no hiding behind artistic license here) and ones I wish I, or my copy-editors, had spotted—but some errors inevitably loom larger than others.

The first of these mistakes mostly amuses me—I sympathize with the nerdy precision that stems from the same love of soccer that made me include the scene in the first place—but it seems too obscure a point to much mar the book. The second is more galling, a failure of my own “ear” in a sense, and more troubling—it’s a chink in the book’s armor of realism, the kind of slip likely to topple some readers’ suspended disbelief (though easily fixed when the book was reprinted in paperback). The third, though, is the one that really nags, the one that nibbles away at the book’s literary idiom.

For the record I’m half-Welsh by blood, but by virtue of not speaking Welsh, the sine qua non of Welshness, especially in North Wales where my father is from and where the book is set, I’ve always felt somewhat less than half-entitled to my Welshness. The book, of course, was written out of this very identity doubt, written not because I felt Welsh enough, but
And yet identity, national identity as well as individual, is surely made up not only of who we tell ourselves we are, but also how others perceive us. We are at once who we think we are, and who others think we are—and we’re lucky if those images align.

precisely because I didn’t, written partly in an effort to understand Welshness better and perhaps find a place for myself within it.

Even if I’ve achieved those personal goals, though, the fear still lingers that many Welsh people read the book with skepticism. Thankfully they’ve mostly been too polite or—a more Welsh quality—taciturn to say so; this may be my own paranoia speaking.

Few groups, to be fair, unequivocally welcome seeing their story told by an outsider (and a writer is always an “outsider” in some sense however impeccable his membership credentials), but the Welsh, for reasons of geography and history, are an especially insular bunch. Identity in their case is strongly determined by language, a language that both includes its speakers, but also deliberately excludes others (principally the English, but also a sizeable number of Welsh who don’t speak the language). And yet identity, national identity as well as individual, is surely made up not only of who we tell ourselves we are, but also how others perceive us. We are at once who we think we are, and who others think we are—and we’re lucky if those images align.

The issue, I suppose, is finally one of audiences. While Welsh readers may find error (and not just in the trivial instance cited above; error is likely inevitable in representation), my book, like any book about a particular place or community, is intended largely for an audience beyond Wales, an audience that doesn’t know Wales and the Welsh. There’s the danger of misrepresentation in that, of course—which those represented rightly chafe at—but I’d respectfully submit that (mild) misrepresentation may be preferable to invisibility, and more broadly that the identity projected outwards to others is just as valid as that projected internally.

THAT ADONISIANS FLAVOR:
ON TRANSLATING STYLE IN POETRY

by Khaled Mattawa

A few weeks ago as I was completing a manuscript of the poetry of the Syrian poet Adonis (Ali Ahmad Said, b. 1930), I found a letter from him in which he thanked me for translating two short poems that appeared in Al-Ahram Weekly, Egypt’s most widely distributed English-language newspaper. He also wrote that he had no objection to my request to translate a selection of his more recent work.

The letter was sent on April 13, 1992. I had translated most of the poet’s Celebrating Vague-Clear Things (1988) and felt empowered to go on with more work. However, I soon realized that this volume, with the particularity of its references, could not stand on its own in English without much of the poet’s other volumes providing context. I also realized that to assemble a volume of the more recent books I needed to work through at least twenty years of poetry. And, further, I had a ways to go before making any claims to being a poet myself. I could not muster the strength to write the poet about my disappointing realizations, perhaps aware that he was accustomed to various kinds of exuberant enthusiasm that amounted to little or nothing.
Deciding on one approach to translating a work will only be frustrating. Sooner rather than later, the translator will break any promises he has made. And determining what one’s approach had been after the project of this size is complete is like trying to describe a long journey by limiting oneself to one episode in it.

As I read more of Adonis’s poetry over the years, I felt repeatedly that only a large selection of work could give a sense of the myriad stylistic transformations that he had brought to modern poetry at large, through his aesthetic renderings of the cultural dilemmas confronting Arab societies in particular. More than ten years after receiving his letter, and after translating several books of modern Arabic poetry, I picked up Adonis’s collected poems and began to translate, this time beginning with the earliest poems. I did not inform the poet that I was working on his poems, as I was still unsure that I’d do him justice. I vowed to contact him only when I had a substantial selection to offer. In 2006, when I was about to dig into the long poem “This Is My Name” (1971), I received a message from the editors at Yale University Press who were interested in assembling the volume that I’d dreamed up way back in 1992. Furthermore, the editors said, Adonis had recommended me for the task. This was a chance that I did not want to miss.

The challenges I’d faced in previous translation projects reared their heads again, but this time each had its Adonisian flavor. First there was the perennial matter of the Arabic used in modern Arabic poetry. Written literary Arabic poetry was never, or at best, may have never been, the language that Arabs spoke daily, which varied from country to country and sometimes from province to province. Like their predecessors, using a standard, grammatically correct Arabic, Arab poets of the twentieth century have struggled with the capacity of their written language to express thoughts and emotions of their ever-changing world. Decidedly more formal than everyday speech, their poetry, the poets reminded themselves, must not echo the dusty language of the ancients.

Adonis, like the poets of his generation, contributed to fostering a diction that accommodated contemporary life. But he insisted that his language also rooted itself in a poetic tradition that goes back almost two millennia. In Adonis’s case, modernizing poetic language did not solely depend on simplifying the diction and approximating spoken language. Unearthing the treasures of Arab thought toward developing a modern form of humanism, he deliberately sought to expose his readers to a wide variety of expressions. His poems often quote classical poetry and frequently refer to historical epochs and a vast array of myths. I think one of the reasons that he is considered among the greatest Arab poets of the twentieth century is that, though he often steps into archaic diction and obscure references, he never seems old fashioned.

How then to translate this Adonisian flavor of old and new, strange and familiar? As a poet who is inclined toward middle diction, I felt that I needed to bring the poet to me, whereby my own writing habits would be the base from which I would begin. I was sure as I translated more of Adonis’s poetry that my English would grow with the poet’s Arabic toward a harmonious accommodation of style. Also, as I translated I had to try to channel the language of the great European modernists, who wrote in language that believed in its alterity and trusted its formal bearing as it addressed contemporary life, and who had a great influence on Adonis. The process, as always, was a matter of listening to the words I’d chosen and comparing them with the literal meaning of the originals and then trying to weigh them emotionally and aesthetically to find the appropriate tone and cadence. As with one’s own work, the process requires a combination of relentless hard work and languorous patience.

The struggle toward this harmonious accommodation of style met its strongest adversary in the least expected places. Yes, indeed, punctuation proved to be one of the most difficult challenges in this project. Languages punctuate differently, and so there was no surprise there. I was concerned nonetheless about keeping up with Adonis’s diverse use of punctuation, which had changed over time. In some cases, it was a matter of translating the flow and movement of the poem rather than its sentences and fragments. Such small decisions (and indecisions) repeatedly brought back to me the old adage about translating the spirit of a poem. Sometimes that spirit depended on the placement or removal of a comma.

In the process of translating Adonis, even as I contemplated punctuating his verse, I was aided by a conversation I had with him in 2007. I had asked him about the critics who attacked his translation of Saint-Johns Perse. “These critics claimed that I erred in the literal sense,” Adonis explained, “but I believe I did not make any poetic errors. That I could not allow myself to do.” I never quite understood what he meant by “poetic
The 4th annual Ben Prize was awarded to Jeremiah Chamberlin and Fritz Swanson. The Ben Prize was established in 2007 in honor of Laurence Kirshbaum and was made possible through the generosity of Bradley Meltzer and a group of donors to promote the teaching of good writing. The award was named after Mr. Kirshbaum’s grandson.

Two exceptional lecturers are chosen each year for their work with students to improve writing skills. Nominations for this award, which includes a monetary stipend, come from students.

The four recipients of this year’s David and Linda Moscow Prize for Excellence in Teaching Composition were Laura Aull, Bethany Davila, Hannah Dickinson, and Nathaniel Mills. The committee had to make difficult decisions from a field of highly qualified and talented instructors in the English Department Writing Program. The four instructors who were selected this year for their work with students to improve writing skills. Nominations for this award, which includes a monetary stipend, come from students.

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These accomplished instructors and celebrating their achievements.

Also awarded this past year was the 1st annual English Department Writing Program Prize for Excellence in First-Year Writing. Inaugural winners were Michael Flood (Instructor, Julie Babcock), Chong Guo (Instructor, Sara Schaff), and Erin Piell (Instructor, Sara Schaff). The three essays from English 125 demonstrated the range of genres in which students write. Chong Guo wrote a highly evocative descriptive essay about his experience as a young painter growing up in China, in which he argued for the importance of memory. Erin Piell’s persuasive essay brought together a range of sources on animal rights and animal experimentation to advance a compelling case for not changing the Animal Welfare Act. Michael Flood turned his attention to the Palestinian-Israeli debate here on campus and provided a rich analysis of how newspaper coverage of the debate compared with the experience of students involved in the debate. All winning essays can be downloaded from our website.

Top L-R: Moscow Prize winners Bethany Davila, Nathaniel Mills, Laura Aull, and Hannah Dickinson
Middle L-R: Ben Prize winners Fritz Swanson and Jeremiah Chamberlin
Bottom L-R: Michael Flood, Julie Babcock, Sara Schaff, and Chong Guo at the presentation of the inaugural English Department Writing Program Prize for Excellence in First-Year Writing.
The English Honors Program

introduction by Catherine Sanok

The English Department Honors Program gives students a special opportunity to pursue advanced study and independent research, as well as to become part of a small community of talented and ambitious scholars. It is a selective program, and above all, a self-selective program, attracting students who are eager to investigate a text, tradition, or cultural phenomenon in much greater detail than is possible within the constraints of a semester-long course and to do so with the kind of intensity and intellectual independence that a senior thesis demands. Students prepare for the experience of writing a thesis by taking Honors seminars and a course in literary theory, and they are guided in their research by a faculty advisor, with whom they work closely. Generous support by the Wagner and Quinn families helps students with research money and other expenses: one student this year went to Harvard’s Houghton library to read Henry James’s letters as part of her research on his attitudes toward women.

Students choose their own topics for their senior projects, and together the honors theses present a snapshot of scholarship in the field as it is shaped by the passions that our students bring to their work. The honors projects this year explored a wide range of literary, historical, and cultural questions: narrative voice in novels by and about first-generation Americans, Virginia Woolf’s fascination with technology, Ernest Hemingway’s representation of masculinity, the marketing of contemporary African literature to U.S. audiences, intellectual and religious contexts for *Moby Dick*, and more. As their topics suggest, the honors students are remarkably ambitious, dedicated, and hard working. They are equally impressive to me for their intellectual generosity and collegiality: despite their different interests, they worked together as a true community of scholars, read and re-read each others’ drafts, offered suggestions for bibliography and writing strategies, and shared their enthusiasm and expertise with one another.

The senior honors students present their theses at the Honors Colloquium during graduation weekend, where we celebrate their achievements and learn about their discoveries. Here, as a sample of the work they have done this year, five of our students describe their thesis projects in their own words.

“Slumdog Millionaire: Politics of Representation and Global Culture”

*Slumdog Millionaire* was the kind of movie that strikingly polarized people whose opinions I respected. No one knew what to make of this film: on the one hand, it seemed to herald a new moment for global cinema, an international production that delivered to diverse audiences in romantic-comedy form the story of an ordinary and poor young man from Mumbai, India; yet simultaneously, *Slumdog* was read by many as poverty porn, an empty-headed fantasy that exploited the oppressed with whom it claimed to sympathize. My thesis was a journey in unpacking that apparent contradiction, better elucidating the multiplicity of critical voices that spring from so many disciplines—film production and theory, literary production and theory, postcolonial and globalization studies—and hail from so many parts of the globe—from India to Britain to the United States. The major lines of criticism inspired me to analyze *Slumdog* as a filmic text adapted from its literary source novel, *Q&A*; discern *Q&A*’s place in a greater landscape of Indian English novels; and evaluate *Slumdog*’s claim to production, in part, within an Indian cinematic idiom. The driving question of my research was: In a globalizing world, does *Slumdog* offer a new kind of platform for positively constructing relationships between hitherto culturally, racially, geographically, and economically distant peoples? *Slumdog*, I argue, is deeply problematic in terms of its representational ethics. The film reworks *Q&A*’s ideological framework to realign specifically Indian and Indian Hindu content with comedic and negative characteristics. It is clear that *Q&A* novelist Vikas Swarup depicts his poor protagonist in *Q&A* without concern for realism or factual accuracy. *Slumdog* is layered with representational careless and orientalist obscuration. And for all the media anticipation of *Slumdog* as a pioneering international production, Bollywood and Hollywood have a history of collaboration that far predates *Slumdog*’s release. Although *Slumdog* hints toward a new kind of international productivity and cultural hybridity, it fails on many production—and representational—levels. Culturally hybrid fictions across the spectrum of English-language productions—novels and films—are happily on the radars of increasingly more and broader cultural consumers, but their representational ethics, in the case of *Slumdog* and *Q&A*, suffer in their effort to capture such audiences.
"‘That Thereby Beauty’s Rose Might Never Die’: Preservation and Mortality in Shakespeare’s Sonnets"

After taking a class on Shakespeare’s poetry, I wondered about the complexities of mortality and the possibility of preservation as presented in the sonnets. The speaker of the sonnets (a poet himself) struggles against the limitations of Time on human life, urged on by his desire to protect his beloved young man. Since his concern dwells so heavily on the constrictions of Time, the use of the sonnet form—which is itself constricted by temporal limits—struck me as curious. Perhaps if a poet could gain control over the restrictive expectation of precisely fourteen lines in iambic pentameter, he might also discover a way to thwart “Time’s sickle.” Therefore, I consider how form supports content, particularly in the three poems that break from the norm set by the other 151 sonnets: Sonnets 99, 126, and 145. For example, both the words and the brevity of twelve-lined Sonnet 126 illustrate the notion of a life cut short. In reviewing Shakespeare’s sonnets, I am reminded that these poems often contradict each other and defy readers’ expectations regarding the concepts of mortality and preservation, so I continue my study by scrutinizing these cruxes. I thereby discover Shakespeare’s revelation of the psyche of his speaker. Although the speaker exhorts his beloved to have children and live on in them, for instance, he also expresses distress that he cannot have a role in the young man’s procreation. Such paradoxes baffle the poet in the sonnets. Although the speaker remains inconclusive about whether his efforts or Time will win out, the presence of these poems today demonstrates that potent, affective connections can be preserved—if not the individuals themselves.

"The Spectacle of Failure: Interrogating the Satiric Conception of Reality in the Late Works of Gustave Flaubert"

Gustave Flaubert’s oeuvre is often described as the summit of literary realism, yet this characterization is belied by aspects of his aesthetic that contradict the easy realist label. In my thesis, I argue that the driving impulse behind his late novels Sentimental Education and Bouvard and Pécuchet is a satiric hostility devoted to undercutting nearly everything the novels portray, and then show how Flaubert submerges this sensibility beneath the precise, disinterested, “objective” narration commonly associated with realism. The result is that he gains realism’s inherent seriousness and turns it against reality, revealing that the “facts of life” add up to a (horrifying) cosmic joke. In the interest of elaborating this core idea, I trace a brief literary history of the transition between eighteenth- and nineteenth-century modes of storytelling, during which satire goes underground. Finally, I present the trajectory of Flaubert’s literary career as the culmination of this trend.

"In Dialogue with the Infinite: A Defense of Samuel Beckett’s Dysfunctional Philosophy of Mathematics"

In one form or another, my project has always been about ignorance and error—in the beginning, especially, my own. It is painful and discouraging to write about a text on which one has absolutely no intellectual purchase, a so-called “novel” that willfully shipwrecks its readers in a sea devoid of the usual lodestars of fiction. My thesis, unfortunately, solves none of the riddles that plagued my first efforts to understand Samuel Beckett. Rather, it considers the hopeless and deeply hopeful struggle to know the unknowable as the quintessentially human experience, and traces this pattern of inquiry through the history and philosophy of mathematics as it is presented and suggested in Beckett’s prose. Underlying the enterprise is a hunch that both the writer of genius and the literary critic share a significant lineage with the mathematician: each, I suggest, is an operator in an age-old and still-flourishing succession of brilliant failures in the face of the incomprehensible infinite.
The best and worst piece of advice I received prior to giving my speech at graduation came from retired Michigan professor Al Storey, who taught speech for several decades. When I expressed concern over how large the crowd would be, he told me, “Just think: It’s better to address 90,000 people one time than to address one person 90,000 times.” I wasn’t so sure.

Walking out onto the stage of the fourth-largest stadium in the world before a cheering crowd was easily one of the most exhilarating experiences of my life–perhaps second only to shaking the president’s hand moments before. To represent my peers on an important day for our university was an incredible opportunity, and I am fortunate and grateful to have had it.

In the weeks leading up to commencement, however, the weight of the opportunity provided some stress, to say the least. It would be, almost certainly, the largest audience I would ever address, and the only time I would have the ear of the President of the United States. I was given a strict four-minute time limit for my remarks. How could I possibly convey a meaningful message in such a short amount of time? How could I present nuanced, original ideas while remaining straightforward? While nightmare visions of losing my breakfast all over the presidential podium—or, worse, the president himself—terrified me, nothing scared me as much as the thought of doing my best but remaining unremarkable.

At the risk of appearing political, I wished to address the ways in which my topic related to President Obama. “The Productive Conflict of Art and Philosophy in Thus Spoke Zarathustra and The Prelude”

As the culmination of my undergraduate career as an English and Philosophy student, I wrote a thesis studying the relationship of philosophy to literature in two works, Friedrich Nietzsche’s Thus Spoke Zarathustra and William Wordsworth’s The Prelude. I argue that philosophy, associated with a fragmented consciousness that questions the apparent self-identity and self-evident nature of experience, is represented in these works as being at odds with literature, which is associated with a consciousness that is at home with itself. Using The Prelude in an illustrative role, my goal is to distill Zarathustra’s story into a coherent narrative, one that draws out strains of Nietzsche’s book that place it in close relation to Romanticism and to Hegel, intellectual predecessors that Nietzsche himself would never claim as influences. 

In the end, I was fairly happy with my speech. While a writer’s feelings toward a piece of writing that he has tirelessly revised are never quite harmonious, I feel that I did just about the best I could have in both writing and delivery.

Still, while I was well received, some people’s comments afterwards surprised me. Some felt I’d roasted Rich Rodriguez, which was never my intent. One woman thanked me for
“saying what needed to be said.” I’m not sure what exactly I said to provoke such a strong response.

As someone hoping to work as a speechwriter, I’ve learned from my experience. When listening to a speech, each audience member possesses a different mindset – each has had different life stories, different heartbreaks and revelations, different interactions with professors and sports teams and elected officials, different foods for breakfast that morning. A statement that is clear and simple in the mind of the speaker can be interpreted any number of ways.

Perhaps if I’d sat down 90,000 times with each individual member of the audience and fully explained myself in dialogue, I’d have been better understood. But I also would have needed more than four minutes.
Thank You!

Despite the continued challenge of these difficult economic times, you, our alumni and friends, have been incredibly generous this year.

You gave over $36,000 to our Strategic and Gift Funds. We use these gifts to enhance the classroom experience for our undergraduates, to support our graduate students, and to retain and recruit the exceptional faculty that make us one of the top English programs in the country.

You donated more than $13,000 to the New England Literature Program (NELP) to provide scholarships for students. Many of these gifts were in memory of Walter Clark, who passed away in May 2008.

You gave $41,000 to the Bear River Writer's Conference and you continued to support the Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP) with more than $23,000 in donations.

The Ralph Williams Excellence in Teaching Award

More than a year ago, Professor Williams taught his last classes at the University of Michigan. His impact, however, will hopefully be felt for many years to come through the encouragement and cultivation of the unique talents that great lecturers bring with them to class. The Department of English Language and Literature has established an annual award to recognize the achievements of faculty in the English Department who reach a broad undergraduate audience with the best that literary study has to offer. Gifts of all sizes can contribute to the success of this fund and to the ongoing excellence in undergraduate teaching at U-M.

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