reading nature

Macklin Smith ❧ John Knott ❧ Susan Scott Parrish ❧ James McIntosh ❧ Keith Taylor

"...nature presented by Sea World?" and "What kind of nature does The Nature Company sell?"

HUMAN NATURE

Macklin Smith

I hadde wonder at whom and wher the pye
Lerned to legge the stikkes in which she leyeth and bredeth.
Ther nys wrighte, as I wene, sholde werche hir nest to paye;
If any mason made a molde therto, muche wonder it were.
And yet me merveilled moore: many othere briddes
Hidden and hileden hir egges ful derne
In mareys and moores for men sholde hem noght fynde,
And hidden hir egges whan thei therfro wente,
For fere of othere foweles and for wilde beestes.

I marveled at the magpie: from whom and where did she learn to lay the sticks in which she lays and breeds? No craftsman, I think, could make her nest for money. If any mason made a model for it, that would be a miracle. And it amazed me even more how other birds hid and covered their eggs full secretly in the marshes and moors so that men couldn't find them, and hid their eggs whenever they left their nests, for fear of other birds and wild animals.

—from *Piers Plowman* by William Langland

Years ago, when I was already an active and fanatical birder, and I first encountered these lines from William Langland's *Piers Plowman*, I thought: *Wow! Langland must have been a birdwatcher! Like our Whitman, he must have actually watched and listened to birds, recording their behavior. And this was over 600 years ago*. Indeed, Langland's accuracy in this passage is unmatched in other late medieval texts, whose authors tend to take a more allegorical or exemplarist view of Nature. Yet even in this passage there exists a man-and-nature dynamic. The birds are very different from us, but like us they are architects and builders, and some of what they do is done to counter our encroachment on their lives. Then too, this passage occurs within a general argument, by the narrator Will, that mankind is

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Sidonie Smith

Chair's Column

Greetings from the Chair!

The past year has been an exceptionally productive and gratifying year in the life of the English Department.

A year ago, we turned our attention to the long-needed revision of our undergraduate concentration, the highest priority of our recent Long-Range Plan. At its annual retreat in August of 2004, the Executive Committee articulated the goals of an undergraduate concentration. Thinking you might find our current thinking about the undergraduate English major of interest, I reproduce our three-part goal statement here:

Breadth of knowledge

A broad critical understanding of literary culture, including canons, alternative canons, and critical histories of literatures in English; the variety of critical perspectives on literature; the history and theory of language; the history and theory of genres (or literary modes); modes of production; and the connection between literary culture and social/historical contexts.

Depth of knowledge

Mastery of a coherent body of more specialized knowledge that the student helps to formulate.

Heightened awareness of language as a medium

The skills needed to recognize, analyze, and appreciate rhetorical, poetic, and other uses and functions of language; to produce close and critical readings of a wide variety of texts; to write clearly and effectively in a variety of modes; to develop and articulate a persuasive argument in speech and in writing; and, for some, to write creatively in various genres.

By April of 2005, we had reached collective agreement on a new concentration, one which will offer more coherence for students through the introduction of sub-concentrations. We also reconceptualized our gateway course and revised our requirements. This coming year we turn to the hard work of implementing the new concentration.

Throughout the year our faculty continued to excel in their achievements, a few of which I catalog for you. Three of our junior faculty, Ifeoma Nwankwo, Scottie Parrish, and Alisse Portnoy, earned tenure and promotion to Associate Professor. Buzz Alexander received the Harold R. Johnson Diversity Service Award. Buzz is also one of three University of Michigan nominees for the Council for Advancement and Support of Education (CASE) Professor of the Year Award. Eric Rabkin received a Distinguished Faculty Achievement Award for 2004-2005. John Rubadeau was honored with the student-nominated 2005 Golden Apple Award. Jennifer Wenzel received a year-long fellowship from the Shelby Cullom Davis Center for Historical Studies at Princeton University. Sara Blair received fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Michigan Humanities Award. Cathy Sanok and Steven Mullaney were awarded Michigan Faculty Fellowships at the Institute of the Humanities.

Continuing with faculty news: This year we said farewell to Ejner Jensen and Richard Tillinghast, both of whom have retired and left the University for new adventures. We also marked the passing of Dr. Steven Dunning this past spring.

Last year, we announced in our Long-Range Plan that we hoped to raise $10,000,000 during the current development campaign to support our many programs, our students, and our distinguished faculty. I'm pleased to announce that this past year, we have been the beneficiary of generous gifts in excess of $5,500,000. A gift of $5 million came from Helen Zell and supports the Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing Program. The expendable Zell gift (involving enhanced fellowship funding for graduate students, an expanded visiting writers program, and discretionary funds for the Director of the program) has already enabled us to attract our top candidates to the fiction and poetry programs. They will become members of an increasingly distinguished group of alumni in Creative Writing. One of our recent MFA graduates, Elizabeth Costovo is now touring the United States in response to the overwhelming excitement about her first novel, *The Historian*, now on the best seller list of the *New York Times Book Review.*

And there has been more generosity. Laurence J. Kirschbaum pledged $500,000 for support of the English Strategic Fund and the Creative Writing Program; Hank Meijer pledged $100,000 for support of the Bear River Writer's Project; and Paul Cooper pledged a Charitable Gift Annuity of $150,000 for support of the English Discretionary Fund. Gifts of $10,000 to $35,000 have been received from the DaimlerChrysler Corporation Fund, the American Council of Learned Societies, the Janette E. Blackburn Trust, the Rockefeller Foundation, the Alan R. Blackburn Trust, William Blair & Company, the Peck Foundation, Inc., Arthur W.

Angood, James E. Foster, and Steven F. Schwartz. In celebration of the 30th anniversary of the New England Literature Program, former "NELPers" donated $200,000 in support of that innovative immersion program. In addition, many generous alums have provided over $50,000 in gifts to the departmental Strategic Fund, which supports faculty recruitment and retention and undergraduate curricular initiatives. Our challenge continues to be raising funds to support doctoral fellowships and to stabilize funding for Buzz Alexander's Prison Creative Arts Project.

The focus of this year's newsletter is the new field of ecocriticism. Our dedicated newsletter editor Macklin Smith asked faculty to tell you how they bring ecocritical perspectives to bear on literary and cultural texts. We hope this issue of our newsletter gives you an opportunity to remember back to your engagement with such "nature" writers as Thoreau, but to come away energized by an appreciation for new ways of approaching the field of English language and literatures in today's classrooms.

I cannot end without saying how much we depend upon the support of our alumni/ae and friends in initiating, implementing, and maintaining our many endeavors and programs. In this time of continuing budgetary pressure, we remain committed to retaining our nationally and internationally recognized faculty and recruiting the most-outstanding scholars to join our ranks. We also remain committed to serving our undergraduates, majors and non-majors alike, and to attracting exceptionally talented graduate students. To meet the challenges and achieve our goals, we will need your considerable help. Your gifts, large and small, will help us to sustain this Department's reputation for excellence in teaching, scholarship, and service to the larger community.

Coming and Going

Meg Sweeney

Meg Sweeney joined us as an Assistant Professor of African American Literature in Fall 2004, after teaching for two years at Georgetown University.

Weaving together literary analysis, enthnography, critical race feminism, and legal studies, Meg's book project, *Doing Time, Reading Crime: Re-reading Injury, Crime, and Healing*, explores how incarcerated women's readings of a range of texts featuring criminalized women—from true crime books to Toni Morrison's *Paradise*—can facilitate the project of contemporary abolitionism, a growing movement that foregrounds the historical and present-day linkages between slavery and imprisonment, and that seeks to undermine prisons' function as a primary means of managing social problems.

We also warmly re-welcome Sunil Agnani and Laura Kasischke, both of whom we've introduced, in different capacities, before. Sunil joins the faculty full-time after two years at the Princeton Society of Fellows, where he revised his thesis, *Enlightenment Universalism and Colonial Knowledge: Denis Diderot and Edmund Burke, 1770-1800*. Sunil's B.A. is from Michigan in 1991, his M.A. from Magdelen College, Cambridge, in 1994, and his Ph.D. from Columbia, in 2002.

Laura Kaschiske moves from an appointment as Lecturer to one as Assistant Professor. She is a whirlwind of creative activity, having just published a volume of poetry, *Gardening in the Dark,* and now completing a novel, *Boy Heaven*, for HarperCollins even as she works on another novel, *Be Mine*, as well as a book of creative non-fiction about women and ghosts, *Ghosts Going Home: A Supernatural History of the Domestic Life*. Laura has also received a grant from the N.E.H to finish a new collection of poetry, her seventh. In her spare time, she served as Resident Poet at the Robert Frost Place in Franconia, New Hampshire.

Joining the ranks of distinguished emeritus faculty are Ejner Jensen and Richard Tillinghast. Also departing, Arlene Keizer has accepted a position at Brown University, Nancy Reisman at Vanderbuilt, and Simon Gikandi at Princeton.

Faculty Publications

It has been another productive year of writing for our faculty. Recent publications include: Martha Vicinus, *Intimate Friends: Women Who Loved Women, 1778-1928;* Lorna Goodison, *Fool-Fool Rose is Leaving Labour-in-Vain Savannah*; Lorna Goodison, *Controlling the Silver*; Laura Kasischke, *Gardening in the Dark*; Nicholas Delbanco, *Anywhere Out of the World: Essays on Travel, Writing, and Death*; Nicholas Delbanco, *The Vagabonds*; Enoch Brater (editor), *Arthur Miller's America: Theater & Culture in a Time of Change*; Nancy Reisman, *The First Desire;* Richard Tillinghast, *Poetry and What Is Real;* Sandra Gunning et al. (editors), *Dialogues of Dispersal: Gender, Sexuality and African Diasporas*; Kay Schaffer and Sidonie Smith, *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition;* Thylias Moss, *Slave Moth;* Anne Gere, Leila Christenbury, and Kelly Sassi, *Writing on Demand: Best Practices and Strategies for Success;* Thomas Lynch, *Booking Passage: We Irish and Americans;* Sara Blair and Jonathan Freedman (editors), *Jewish in America*; Khaled Mattawa (co-editor), *Dinarzad's Children: Anthology of Contemporary Arab American Fiction*; Khaled Mattawa (translator), *A Red Cherry on a White Tile Floor: Poems by Maram Al-Massr.*

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the uniquely irrational animal—a decidedly heretical viewpoint of which Will is eventually disabused by higher spiritual authorities Even the accuracy of Langland's nature writing, in other words, is fundamentally humanistic and, indeed, theistic.

Is it possible to write about wildlife without our values inflecting our observations? Probably not. In Homer, unusual bird behavior is an omen needing our interpretation. In the Old English heroic tradition, wolves, ravens, and eagles feed exclusively on human corpses. Nature proves Jehovah's power in Job. In Bonaventura's *Mind's Road to God*, plants and animals are God's signs, meant to direct human souls to toward holy contemplation. Even Basho's haiku about the lone crow on a bare autumn tree communicates a human (Zen) perspective. Closer to home, I write in one of my own poems called "A Mystery" about "horizon-braiding shearwaters." Although this image gives, I think, a true and lovely picture of the flight pattern of these seabirds, my vision has never presented itself to any shearwater wheeling over the wave-troughs in search of edible tidbits. Shearwaters are never at their own horizons; we are. And even when I generalize in the same poem about the relationship between people and birds—"They prepossess us with their otherness"—my generalization is humanistic.

In recent decades, perhaps in response to the environmental movement, a sub-field of literary studies has emerged: the study of nature writing, sometimes called "eco-criticism." A number of English faculty members do research in this field, offer courses in it, and/or contribute creatively to it. For the past 30 years, too, we have sponsored the New England Literature Program (NELP), which brings our students and teachers to the Maine woods for an intense study of nature and nature writing. In the pages that follow, four faculty members describe their particular interests in this field, and we offer a celebration of NELP.

TEACHING THE WILDERNESS

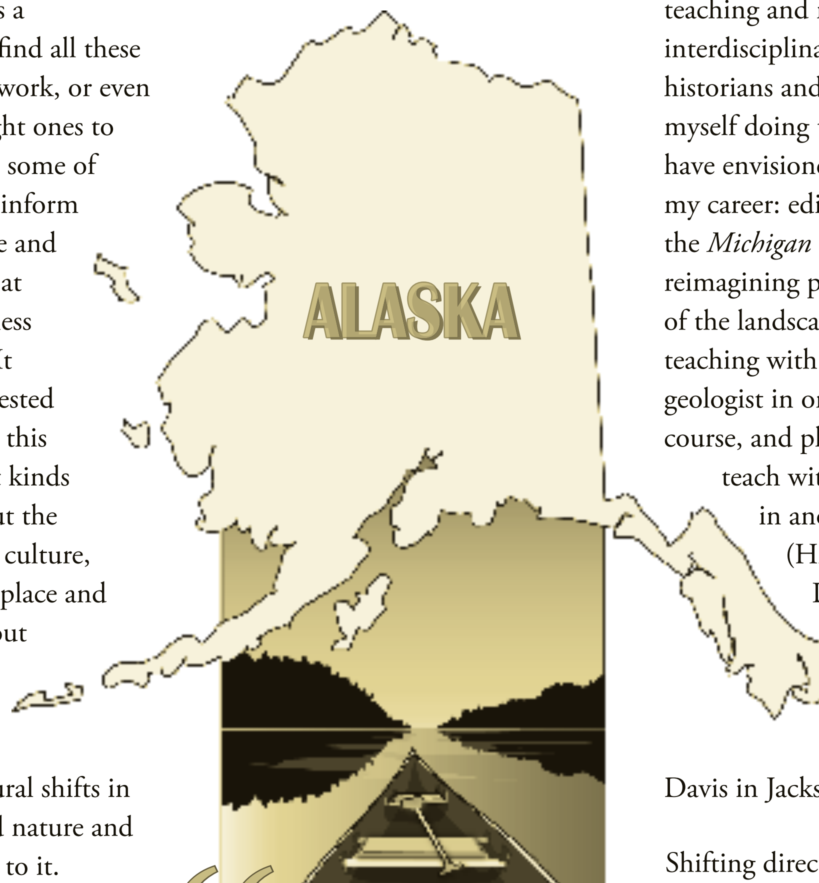
John Knott

Since 1988 I have been teaching an undergraduate course (Literature of the American Wilderness) which traces an arc from Puritan ideas of wilderness to contemporary writing about wildness in Alaska. The course grew out of my experience of reading a kind of literature that was largely missing from the curriculum at a time when I was taking canoe trips in what I thought of as wild country, including a particularly memorable one down a wilderness river in northern Alaska, the Noatak. My guess that there would be student interest in such a course proved right, and I have continued teaching it, to a mix of students from English, the Program in the Environment, Biology, Anthropology, and other departments and programs scattered across the University. Many come out of an interest in the subject driven by their own outdoor experience, which can range from camp counseling or time spent at a family summer place to backpacking and mountain climbing around the West. The diversity in the backgrounds of the students, and the fact that many connect with the reading in personal ways that they might not in other classes, have made it unusually satisfying to teach, and this has encouraged me to offer related courses, including senior seminars in contemporary nature writing. My intellectual engagement with the literature and the maturing of my thinking about wilderness and wildness, stimulated by an ongoing dialogue with students, led me to write a book based on some of the writers I teach, *Imagining Wild America* (2002).

Offering a course based on changing ways of imagining wilderness represented a radical departure for someone whose career to that point had been focused on teaching and writing about English Renaissance literature. I still enjoy teaching Shakespeare and Milton, but my energies have been increasingly absorbed by teaching and writing about literature that deals in some way with our changing relationship to nonhuman nature. My own evolution has paralleled the growth of a new academic field sometimes known as ecocriticism, most simply described as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. In an influential book that helped to define the field, *The Environmental Imagination* (1995), Lawrence Buell suggests several criteria for identifying an environmentally

oriented work: it shows human history to be implicated in natural history (as in the novels of Thomas Hardy); human interest is not understood to be the only legitimate interest; human accountability to the environment is part of the text's ethical orientation; it implies some sense of the environment as a process rather than as a constant. One need not find all these characteristics in a given work, or even agree that they are the right ones to look for, but they suggest some of the critical concerns that inform this approach to literature and why it has emerged now, at a time of growing awareness of environmental issues. It has prompted those interested in looking at literature in this way to ask some different kinds of critical questions: about the interaction of nature and culture, about how we constitute place and how it constitutes us, about how literature responds to ways in which we have altered our environment, about cultural shifts in the ways we perceive wild nature and manage our relationships to it.

Ecocritics are approaching some familiar texts (nonfiction as well as fiction and poetry) in different ways and introducing new ones to the curriculum. A tradition of nature writing in America, mainly nonfiction prose, has become more visible and has taken on new life as contemporary writers expand its boundaries, partly by interweaving natural history and autobiographical reflection in ways not anticipated by anything in Thoreau (for example, Terry Tempest Williams's *Refuge* and Janisse Ray's *Ecology of a Cracker Childhood*). Ecocritics have recently extended their interest to ethnic literatures and to what has been called the literature of urban nature. They have welcomed, and to some extent participated in, a kind



"The course grew out of my experience of reading a kind of literature that was largely missing from the curriculum at a time when I was taking canoe trips in what I thought of as wild country..."

of cultural criticism pioneered by historians who ask such questions as "How is nature presented by Sea World?" and "What kind of nature does The Nature Company sell?" I like to ask students to look at how nature is used in print advertisements and televisions commercials, to sell SUV's, for example. Like many of my colleagues who work in other new areas of inquiry, I find my teaching and research increasingly interdisciplinary. I read environmental historians and ecologists, and find myself doing things I could not have envisioned at an earlier stage in my career: editing a special issue of the *Michigan Quarterly Review* (on reimagining place) with a member of the landscape architecture faculty, teaching with a biologist and a geologist in one new course, and planning to teach with a historian in another (History and Literature of the Rocky Mountains) at the Geology Department's Camp Davis in Jackson Hole, Wyoming.

Shifting directions as I have has shown me the advantages of getting students out of the classroom occasionally and also of engaging them in other than formal critical writing, in my case by requiring substantial weekly journal entries. Students who learn how to take advantage of the flexibility the journal form allows often produce a particularly engaged and perceptive kind of criticism. Some find effective ways of writing about their own experience as this relates to the concerns of a course, something

I encourage along with analytic commentary on the reading. Some of these write final papers in the form of personal essays in which they discover ways of shaping their experience and embodying recognitions about its significance. They tend to invest more of themselves in such writing and often produce better work than they might otherwise. Some write about the way experiences with a parent or grandparent have shaped their attitudes toward the natural world. One biology student, developing a theme she had explored in her journal, wrote about how an ethnobotany course at the University's Biological Station influenced the way she lives. An art student with a fine sense of irony wrote about her childhood experience of skinning muskrats trapped by her father, and won a Hopwood award for her essay. Students remember such papers. So does their teacher.

NEW WORLD NATURE

Susan Scott Parrish

In 1776, Thomas Jefferson would sanction the thirteen colonies' rebellion from Britain by invoking the highest authority he and his generation could conceive: "Nature, and Nature's God." Enlightenment science, by discovering Nature's many laws, had turned it into the ultimate arbiter of truth. Citizens of the new United States would take this 'fact' and place it at the heart of national identity. If Europeans had centuries of culture, Americans had expansive horizons of nature. This was Nature's nation. Before 1776, however, people living in the colonies—whether English colonials, Native Americans, or enslaved Africans—had experienced many forms and degrees of environmental disorientation. How these various groups—in conflict and sometimes in concert with each other—made scientific knowledge out of this disorientation has been the subject of my research for a number of years.

In 1753, wealthy planters Eliza and Charles Pinckney crossed the Atlantic from their home at the edge of the British empire in Charles Town, South Carolina, bearing in their luggage three colorful little birds, "an indigo bunting, a nonpareil, and a yellow bird." The couple traveled with their precious avian captives to the very center of empire, arriving in London at the court of Augusta, the dowager Princess of Wales, to whom they presented the birds and themselves. These birds were part of a larger migration of natural specimens that came on ships from the Americas to European capitals beginning in 1492. Opossums, potatoes, brazilwood, mammoths' bones, Jesuit's Bark, American Ginseng, hummingbirds, bullfrogs, and butterflies were all transported over the ocean to satisfy an almost insatiable European curiosity for flora and fauna from the New World. These specimens accrued at first in royal and aristocratic collecting houses called 'curiosity cabinets' and eventually at scientific institutions like the Royal Society of London,

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begun in 1662. Roots and slips were planted in royal or apothecary gardens. Specimens came in such numbers from the Americas (and to a lesser extent from Africa and Asia) in this period that Europeans had to create new systems by which to organize and new institutions made up of naturalists who could analyze the ever-expanding natural world.

My forthcoming book, *American Curiosity: Cultures of Natural History in the Colonial British Atlantic World* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005), tells the story of this process. Instead of describing the scientific Enlightenment as a largely European, urban, elite phenomenon involving a few brilliant discoveries, I describe the day-to-day American scenes in which knowledge about the natural world was slowly made, collected, and ultimately sent to Europe, reshaping paradigms when it arrived. Because the British colonies in the Americas were multi-racial and socially fluid in a way that England was not, and because Native Americans, enslaved Africans, white farmers, and female midwives

held the scientific information Europeans needed, knowledge making in America was more socially complex than anywhere else in the world. For example, the Puritan minister and amateur scientist Cotton Mather learned in the 1720s about healing plants from local Natives and learned about the practice of smallpox inoculation from his African slave, Onesimus. He sent this information to the Royal Society of London where it—and countless other letters like these—extended the boundaries of English knowledge but also socially challenged English ideas about *who* was capable of making knowledge.

My book therefore argues for the importance of the consideration of the Americas in creating a new and more complex understanding of the scientific Enlightenment. Its other central argument is that if one is to understand early American history and literature, one must put the natural world and human interaction with that natural world at the center of analysis. Bringing the natural world more centrally into histories of culture not only redirects our anthropocentricism (or human-centeredness)—a key concept for ecocritics—but it also makes particular historiographic sense for colonial America. Almost all questions of culture circulated through nature: J. Hector St. John de Crevecoeur wrote in his *Letters from an American Farmer* (1782) that "Men are like Plants" and hence constituted out of their local air, water, soil, and sun; he believed that cold rugged climates produced virtuous hard-working citizens while hot climates necessarily produced the monstrous twins of tyranny and slavery. Crevecoeur stood at the end of a long tradition of theorizing about the climate's effects on race, sex, intelligence, generation, politics, and cultural achievement. It is not an overstatement to say that colonials in general were obsessed with diagnosing their own Americanization, and they did so *especially* by reading and making signs out of the natural world. Though we are still dependent on the natural world, twenty-first-century technology allows those in industrialized nations to ignore that dependence, as we control our climate, speed, light, and nutrition with minimal effort. Not only were all seventeenth- and eighteenth-century subjects more aware of natural cycles and capacities than we are, but subjects in colonial America—whether a Cherokee dealing with strange pathogens or a greatly increased demand for deer peltry, an African bringing her knowledge of rice cultivation to a Carolina swamp, a surveyor hired to map colonial boundary lines, or a planter's wife in Jamaica sending a hummingbird nest to a gentlewoman in London—all were particularly alert to the workings of American nature because of its peculiar unpredictability and novelty. When, as mentioned above, Eliza and Charles Pinckney brought those beautiful little buntings to London, they were not only acting as scientific collectors. They were also staging their American identities by offering these birds as evidence of the very environment that had similarly fashioned them. If the birds were beautiful and melodious, colonial culture, in turn, possessed refinement. Nature proved it.

EMILY DICKINSON AND NATURE

James McIntosh

Emily Dickinson was a genius with uniquely extravagant tendencies, both as a writer and as a woman who lived out her life on her own terms. Nevertheless, the way she thought and wrote about "nature" has lessons that can inform our reading of poetry more generally. As a committed if tough-minded American Romantic, Dickinson was drawn to the idea of nature as a living whole. She also loved the natural world, loved the hills, flowers, birds, and insects around her as part of her birthright as a New England woman and writer. True, she enjoyed letting its "eccentricities"—bats, snakes, mushrooms, beetles, frogs—give her speakers tremors of fear or nervousness; and she found intimations of dread or death in frosts and winter skies. But such intimations

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NELP

Thirtieth Anniversary

The New England Literature Program (NELP) Celebrates Its Thirtieth Year

For a three day weekend last September, people came from all over the United States—from Seattle, Washington, to Atlanta, Georgia; from Vermont to California; and from all around the Midwest—to celebrate the 30th Anniversary of University of Michigan's New England Literature Program (NELP). They did not come for a reunion featuring guest speakers, cocktail parties, and elegant hotel rooms; instead, they came for a short re-creation of NELP. They taught one another in small discussion classes, organized poetry read-arounds; wrote in their journals; canoed, and took nature walks; they broke into musical jam sessions, stomped through a lively contra dance, and put on a talent show around a campfire; they slept in tents or rustic cabins. And they talked! Alums from NELP 1 to NELP 30 found they could converse easily, sharing common experiences. Almost unanimously they said, "NELP was the best thing I ever did at U-M. It changed my life." What explains such a long-lasting impact?

NELP was created in 1974 by two U-M English professors—Walter Clark and Alan Howes—who conceived of an education that was collaborative, not competitive; that connected intellectual and physical challenges; and that explored the relationship between the literature, the history, the culture, and the environment of New England. Formerly based in New Hampshire, NELP now takes place at Camp Wohelo on Sebago Lake in Raymond, Maine, just down the road from Nathaniel Hawthorne's childhood home. Forty students and twelve staff members spend the seven weeks of spring half term reading, writing, and hiking together in a close-knit community, living a very simplified life style," living deliberately," as Thoreau would say.

Students can appreciate Thoreau's stay at Walden more directly since they are living in small, unheated cabins themselves at NELP. Emerson's "Self-Reliance" comes alive in new ways as students cook and clean, teach classes themselves, and learn how to find their way through new territory with a compass and topographical maps. From their own experience and from Thoreau, Hawthorne, Dickinson, Frost, and all the other assigned authors, they learn the necessary lessons of both community and solitude. They discover that the environment is a "text" to be read as carefully as the books assigned at NELP.

Frost's sonnet "Time Out" develops a fine metaphor for the kind of learning that happens at NELP:

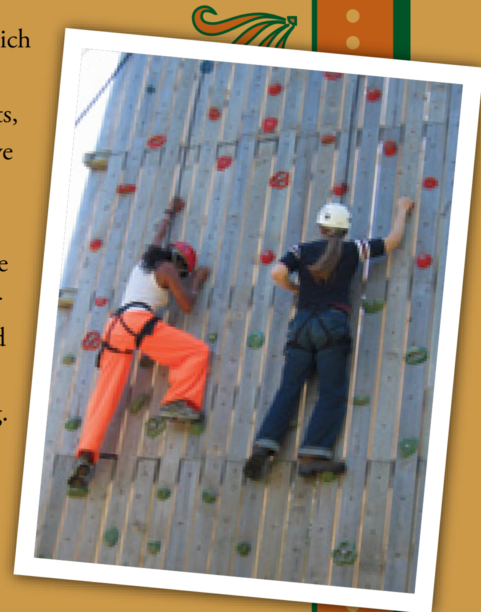
> It took that pause to make him realize
> The mountain he was climbing had the slant
> As of a book held up before his eyes
> (And was a text albeit done in plant).
> Dwarf cornel, gold-thread, and maianthemum,
> He followingly fingered as he read,
> The flowers fading on the seed to come;
> But the thing was the slope it gave his head:

The same for reading as it was for thought,
So different from the hard and level stare
Of enemies defied and battles fought.
It was the obstinately gentle air
That may be clamored at by cause and sect
But will have its moment to reflect.

Students (some of whom have never climbed or even seen a mountain before) may indeed learn to "read" the mountain's "text…done in plant," by taking plant guides on hiking trips and learning to identify dwarf cornel and the myriad other plants Frost mentions in his poems. More importantly, living and learning in the natural world gives students that important moment to reflect, that thoughtful slope of the head—"the same for reading as it was for thought"—which offers a different perspective from "the hard and level stare" of life's clamor. Each NELP may be a flower that fades after seven weeks, but the experiences which flower there are harbingers of "the seed to come."

The seeds sown at NELP come to fruition early and late. Students who had never written a story before NELP come back and win Hopwood awards; some from other disciplines decide to become English majors; many decide to go into teaching, to Teach for America, or to Peace Corps. Students return from NELP with a renewed joy in learning, a new confidence in their ability to understand literature, a desire to keep reading and writing on their own, and a determination to take charge of their own lifelong education.

A truly wonderful thing happened after this year's NELP. After the usual bout of post-NELP nostalgia, grieving, and longing to return, one student emailed the group and said, "OK that's enough nostalgia. NELP is over; we can't go back. But if NELP means anything, let's keep it going into the future." So NELP 30 students have started a group called Postscript, which meets every other Friday night, and they give themselves writing prompts, teach themselves elective classes, have musical jam sessions, and/or take hikes (usually a combination of at least two or three of these). They are drawing in other students too. Their enthusiasm is still running high, and they keep coming up with creative ideas for the next Postscript meeting. And all this on Friday nights! Can you believe it?



Such enthusiastic learning is a tribute to the vitality of that vision that Walter Clark and Alan Howes had thirty years ago of a different kind of education. NELP evolves slightly as each new batch of students and staff members contribute their own creative ideas, but the heart of the experience remains strong and recognizable, as Bruce Weber wrote in his *New York Times* article about NELP, "A Sense of Place," (Aug. 1, 2004) after visiting NELP last spring. He was a student on the very first NELP, thirty years ago. He wants to come back again this year. Like so many other NELP alums, he too came halfway across the country to the NELP 30-Year Celebration, to share once more in a community of people who found their lives changed by the experience of studying together the texts of New England literature and the texts of the New England landscape.

For more information, please visit the NELP website:
http://www.lsa.umich.edu/english/nelp/

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hardly disturbed her life-long faith in nature. As she wrote toward the beginning of her career explaining her experience to her Bostonian literary advisor Thomas Wentworth Higginson, "When much in the Woods as a little Girl, I was told that the Snake would bite me, that I might pick a poisonous flower, or Goblins kidnap me, but I went along and met no one but Angels, who were far shyer of me, than I could be of them." Dickinson's experience of the natural world was practical as well as poetical. True, she did not go hunting as a teen-ager like her well-loved predecessor Henry Thoreau; and during her last years she lived famously on the second floor of her family house, coming down only to bake bread or tend to the flowers or interact with members of her household. But from her school education she had a better grounding in botany and geology than even the young Thoreau, and she got her facts right when she wrote about them.

Yet despite her familiarity with the natural world, an underlying philosophical assumption in all her writing is that we cannot know nature, or the creatures of nature, or any natural object in itself. She once wrote her cousin Frances Norcross, "I suppose the wild flowers encourage themselves in the dim woods, and the bird that is bruised limps to his house in silence, but we have human natures, and these are different." More generally she ended a poem about the "mystery" of a well with these intriguing stanzas:

> But nature is a stranger yet;
> The ones that cite her most
> Have never passed her haunted house,
> Nor simplified her ghost.
>
> To pity those that know her not
> Is helped by the regret
> That those who know her, know her less
> The nearer her they get.

Nature was one of those "subjects of which we know nothing," like God, death, friends, and the human heart—the only subjects that vitally interested her.

Dickinson inherited the view that things in the natural world cannot be directly known from the post-Kantian idealist tradition as it developed in Britain and the United States, first in Wordsworth and Coleridge and later in Emerson, one of her chief intellectual mentors. One knows a natural object not in itself, but as an impression of consciousness; "in our life alone does nature live," as Coleridge wrote. Her faith in nature was more precisely a faith in the imagination of nature. She was fond of quoting Wordsworth's line from "Elegiac Stanzas," "The light that never was, on sea or land," understanding that the poet or observer creates that light of vision, creates the Angels she meets in the Woods. But her idealism was stricter and more insistent than that of her English-speaking predecessors. According to her radical idealism, the very act of perception divides what is perceived from the perceiver: "Perception of an object costs / Precise the Object's loss," she wrote in one of her self-assertively philosophical poems. The "object" in this poem recedes into the distance, rendered beautiful ("set fair") by virtue of being perceived, but also situated "so far."

Dickinson drew an inference from this chain of thought, however, that is unusual if not unprecedented in international Romanticism. If natural things cannot be known, they become infinitely available for figurative manipulation. Her style over and over depends on her awareness of the uncanny possibilities of metaphor drawn from nature. Familiar examples abound: "We passed the Fields of Gazing Grain"; "Kissing her bonnet to the meadow – / And the Juggler of Day is gone!"; "There's a certain Slant of light, / Winter Afternoons – / That oppresses, like the Heft / Of Cathedral Tunes." She rarely if ever presents natural detail without showing awareness of possible figurative implications.

In the well known poem, "A Bird came down the Walk," Dickinson even teaches the reader how to appreciate her gift for translating objects into figurative language. It begins plainly:

> A Bird came down the Walk –
> He did not know I saw –
> He bit an Angleworm in halves
> And ate the fellow, raw,
>
> And then he drank a Dew
> From a Convenient Grass –

The speaker accurately observes the behavior of an American Robin, how it eats worms, sips dew, hops to the side, glances about, and flies away. But at the end of the poem, the language changes drastically. The speaker surreally projects the bird's utter inhuman strangeness as it leaves her behind.

> And he unrolled his feathers
> And rowed him softer home –

> Than Oars divide the Ocean,
> Too silver for a seam –
> Or Butterflies, off Banks of Noon
> Leap, plashless as they swim.

The bird is not a cannibal, nor a wine drinker, nor a gentleman, nor anything human. The nearer the speaker gets to the bird, the less she knows him. For the surprised speaker, the bird's flight is thus an occasion not for knowledge, but for vision through figurative language. The speaker "loses" the object she perceives, but "sets it fair" as it rows though a silver sea of air and leaps without a splash, in "Banks of Noon" constructed wholly by means of Dickinson's language.

The point of such an example—and one can find hundreds of similar instances—is that by sticking to her idealism Dickinson significantly expands the possibilities for poetry. If nature is a stranger, the poet remains in charge of her refigurations of it. The otherness of nature is throughout her poetry a catalyst for her invention. Since she only knows her own perceptions of nature, it becomes a source of enormously varied analogies for the nuances of her own mental experience. To adapt an idea from Robert Weisbuch, her poetry of an unknown nature is, magisterially, a poetry of analogy.

Dickinson's conception of figurative language was intuitive rather than systematic. Nevertheless, such a conception infiltrates modern American poetry of nature, from Stevens and Crane to Plath and Doty. It is one of the ways she still speaks to us, while also bringing us back to the natural world she studied and loved.

THE SILENCE IN MEMORY

Keith Taylor

The Westcott Cemetery is on a small rise above the shallow valley of the Dog Pound River, which is just a creek really, flowing north to join the Red Deer River at a point where that river is still a very fast mountain stream falling toward the east out of the Rockies. There can't be more than 200 graves in the cemetery, maybe far fewer, and the whole plot is surrounded by a few scrubby looking evergreens.

When I look west from the graves I visit there, the mountains are cold and blue, often white. Spectacular, of course, but daunting in their overwhelming presence. To the east, the land seems to stretch away across the entire prairie, as if there is not a grove of trees or a hill between the cemetery and Winnipeg or Minneapolis or even Chicago two thousand miles away. Although there are a couple of newer homes next to the cemetery, built on what Canadians call "acreage" and in the late twentieth century style that now dominates much of the North American rural landscape, most of the land that can be seen from the rise is not much altered from the time before the first settlers carved out their homesteads from the prairie sod. It does indeed feel like the back of beyond.

> "That story seemed to have fallen into a forgotten, silent, place in our collective memory and had disappeared entirely. Like many people I knew that the history of poor women is the history most often overlooked."

Five of my Irish immigrant relatives are buried in the Westcott Cemetery. The date—1907—on the headstone of Mary Finlay, my great-grandmother, is one of the earliest dates there. Before this visit to the cemetery, I had already been back in Alberta for several weeks, recording the stories of my older relatives, reading old newspapers in the Provincial Library in Edmonton, trying to find copies of official documents—land deeds and death certificates. My research was motivated by my discovery several years earlier of the police report of Mary Finlay's suicide, a desperate and moving death that not one living member of my family knew about. That story seemed to have fallen into a forgotten, silent, place in our collective memory and had disappeared entirely. Like many people, I knew that the history of poor women is the history we hear about the least. Here, I thought, was

one story I could pull back from the silence.

My work last summer, trying to reconstruct that life, was supported by a small grant from the Center for the Ethnography of Everyday Life at the U of M's Institute for Social Research. Although the grant didn't demand that I come up with answers, I felt the need to find them. Why had Mary committed suicide? What was her family life like? Did their work in the fields crush her spirits, or was her death the result of other, less regionally specific, causes? What really happened to her children, my grandfather's brothers and sisters?

But I had reached the point where I thought these questions could never be answered. There were just too many disagreements between documents or between the stories preserved in the various branches of the family. There were too many gaps, too much silence behind the noise. I had come back to the cemetery just to remind myself that these had been real people and they had experienced very definite events in their own historical moment. I suspected that even if I answered my questions, I might not have imagination enough to understand their lives here. I realized that the landscape around me appeared spectacular because at least part of my perception of it was the view of a tourist. For my great-grandmother that Western landscape, even its beauty, offered no solace.

As I left the Westcott Cemetery that day in July, I heard a western meadowlark sing from a fence post across the road. The bird's bright yellow breast gleamed in the sunlight. Although I am now used to this bird's eastern relative in the fields of Michigan, the loud and often melodious song of the western variety is one of the songs that fills the memory of my childhood. I was only twelve when my family left the Canadian prairies, but I have distinct memories of some of the birds and their songs. Besides the meadowlark, I remember the hawks and falcons, the nutcrackers and gray jays in the mountains, the different kinds of ducks paddling around in the little prairie ponds in the springtime, ponds we called sloughs and that usually dried up by the end of summer. I find it odd that I have such vivid memories of the birds flying and singing in my rural Albertan boyhood, but I'll also admit that I'm a bit proud of those memories.

Just past the meadowlark I saw a piece of luminescent turquoise hover for a moment, then flutter down to the ground. A mountain bluebird. This was a bird I'd been hoping to see here, one that I didn't think I'd ever seen. Different books have tried different words to describe its color—azure, sky-blue, sparkling-blue.

Selected **Poetry**

Linda Gregerson
Frederick G.L. Huetwell Professor

From "Grammatical Mood," which was published in *Waterbourne* (2002).

4.

For want of rain the corn was lost.

For want of a bank loan we plowed up the windbreak
and burnt it
(you must learn to think on a different scale, they told

us that). For want of a windbreak and rainfall
and corn
the topsoil rose on the wind and left. God's own

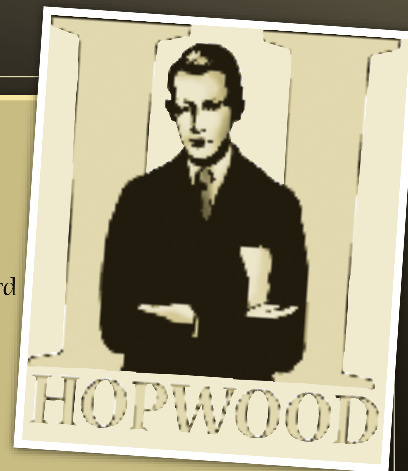
strict grammar (imperative mood). I meant
to return
to joy again. Just

give me a minute. Just look at the sky.

The mountain bluebird is the bluest of the three North American species of bluebird, and is often described as unforgettable. I watched this bright male pick insects from a recently cut hay field. On my way into town, I saw two more fly off away from the road. Two days later I saw a whole family—male, female, and three recently fledged young—in the parking lot of a small village park. Shortly after I saw several more in Banff National Park.

As I thought more about this spectacular bird that I was seeing everywhere I traveled in Alberta, I wondered why I had no memory of it from my childhood. I had traveled all of these roads hundreds of time when I was a boy. I had played in these fields. I had watched meadowlarks and hawks and I remembered them. Perhaps the mountain bluebird—like our eastern bluebird—was wiped out of part of its range by illness and the effects of DDT, only to return to a healthy population after the chemical was banned. Maybe there were no mountain bluebirds around in the 1950s and early 60s when I lived out there. Or maybe the mountain bluebird had fallen into that emptiness, that silence in my memory, the same place where the history of my great-grandmother's life and death had disappeared. Perhaps any story I could find, of the bluebirds or of the people, would be more the story of that silence than of anything else. Perhaps what we didn't see, didn't hear, didn't remember, was the most interesting story.

Avery Hopwood 75th Anniversary Celebration



The Hopwood Awards will be celebrating their 75th anniversary during the winter term of 2006. Many events are planned: the release of an anthology of Hopwood Award winners of distinction; a film series centered on films written by Hopwood Award winners; a mini-course on these films and the movie of Hopwood's work, *Gold Diggers of 1933*; the production of Avery Hopwood's play, *The Gold Digger*, a special exhibit of Hopwood memorabilia in the Rare Book Room of Harlan Hatcher Library; presentations and a banquet for returning Hopwood Award winners; readings by past winners; and the release of an issue of the *Michigan Quarterly Review* devoted to the Hopwood Program.

The anthology will appear under the aegis of the University of Michigan Press, a book of some 250 pages containing prominent work of Hopwood Award-winning writers from 1931 to the present, with an introductory overview of the program and its history that I plan to provide.

The film festival of work by past Hopwood Award winners including Arthur Miller, David Neuman, and Laurence Kasdan will take place through the term. Professor Peter Bauland will sponsor the mini-course on these films and Hopwood's work, and on February 9th through the 12th the Theater Department will stage *The Gold Diggers* under the direction of Philip Kerr.

Our celebration of Hopwood's gift to the University will take place throughout the semester and beyond, with an open house at Shaman Drum Bookstore for past Hopwood Award winners and, in 2007, release of the special Hopwood edition of *Michigan Quarterly Review* edited by Lawrence Goldstein.

Alice Fulton will give a reading at the Undergraduate Hopwood Awards ceremony on January 24th, and Charles Baxter will deliver the Hopwood Lecture on April 21st. You are all cordially invited to attend.

—Nicholas Delbanco

Have you seen the new English Website?

—www.lsa.umich.edu/english

Over the past year the web development team in the English Department has worked to redesign the Department's website. The goal was to bring a greater amount of interactivity to its users, to make the site easier to navigate, and to be able to offer information tailored to specific audiences—alumni included. We hope you like the changes we've made, and we are working to improve upon the site even further in the near future. Look around and let us know what you think. Problems, praise, questions, concerns—all are welcome at:

eng.web.admin@umich.edu

making a difference

The Vision

The Department's goal is to enhance our prominence in the field as a curricular and intellectual leader and to advance our standing in the national rankings. In order to strengthen our position as one of the top English departments in the country, we must recruit and retain the best faculty possible. And to remain competitive in recruiting the best graduate students, we must augment our fellowship program. We must also continue to develop innovative teaching initiatives, including many that reach beyond the four walls of the traditional classroom. Finally, and most crucially for our junior faculty, we must attend to the crisis in book publishing by supplementing the minimal resources available in the College and University with a program of subventions for first books.

The Value

In recent years, our graduate program has moved up dramatically in the national rankings—up to 11 in the most recent ranking. We are currently tied for second place among state institutions, our gender studies cohort was ranked in the top five such programs in the latest U.S. News and World Report, and our MFA program ranks second in the nation. As one of the College's largest departments, we have seen a number of undergraduates go on to distinguished careers as writers, journalists, and Hollywood screenwriters; and many more have moved into fields such as law, medicine, and business.

The Difference

With the goal of becoming one of the top English departments in the country, we seek endowment funding for the following areas in order to best serve our undergraduate and graduate students.

Endowed Honors Directorship and Seminar $2.5 million

We are justly proud of our undergraduate honors program. Our honors students in literature and creative writing consistently win the majority of College awards and prizes open to all undergraduates. Our students not only write remarkably wide-ranging and original theses, they focus the energies and commitments of faculty who advise and teach them. We want to build on our record of recognition and the intellectual community fostered by the Honors Program by raising funds for an Endowed Honors Directorship and an endowed Honors Seminar. We envision the Honors Seminar as a collaboratively taught course drawing distinguished visitors to campus to engage with our most ambitious students.

Named Endowed Professorship
$2 million

Bringing new faculty to the Department in the next five years is crucial to our goal of improving our national ranking, especially in the face of increasing competition for top faculty. Outstanding faculty are central to the continuing quality of the program and ongoing leadership of the Department. An endowment of $2 million will establish a Named Endowed Professorship, which will serve as a powerful recruitment tool for distinguished scholars.

Graduate Fellowship Fund
$750,000 per student

To be competitive with other top-tier graduate programs, the Department needs to provide full funding for each student. Currently, we lack the funds to maintain a competitive edge in attracting the top students to our MFA and PhD programs. We need the help of our donors to assure the continued viability of our programs. Excellent graduate students attract and help us retain excellent faculty members. We seek to raise $3 million to $5 million in endowed funds for graduate student fellowships. An annual gift of $37,500 or the equivalent interest income from a $750,000 endowment will fund one graduate student for one year.

Prison Creative Arts Project (PCAP)
$600,000

The PCAP program enables undergraduate students to create art, writing, and theater with incarcerated youth and adults. PCAP has led to curricular innovation, community action partnerships, and long-term alliances, and it has had a profound impact upon community members and organizations, as well as a profound impact on our own students whose learning experiences have been expanded and deepened. Through involvement in PCAP, our students enter spaces from which their lives have excluded them: their stereotypes disappear; they develop new capacities, ideas, and goals; and many of them are so profoundly affected that their career trajectories change dramatically. We seek endowment funds to ensure that these community outreach projects and others like them continue.

Bear River Writers' Conference $400,000

Set in the wilderness near Petoskey, Michigan, the childhood home of Ernest Hemingway, the Bear River Writers' Conference brings local Native American youth together with other aspiring writers to hone their skills. With workshops lead by outstanding writers and Michigan faculty, Bear River is a place of diverse community that welcomes all of the individual voices of its many participants. We wish to endow this yearly conference to ensure that their work and their impact on aspiring writers in the community continues.

New England Literature Program (NELP) $600,000

The UM New England Literature Program (NELP) is an intensive Spring-term learning experience offered off-campus at a camp in New England. Forty students study New England authors of various backgrounds in a natural setting. Journal writing is an integral part of the NELP experience. Through their journals, students explore the NELP experience, the natural world, and the New England environment and culture—and often write creatively. In addition to camping, canoeing, and hiking, participants also learn how to cooperate in a communal environment. This immensely popular opportunity is a unique, intimate, life-changing learning experience that is unlike any other offering at the University. With an endowment of $600,000, we can preserve this unique learning experience for generations of future students.

Doctoral Student Internship program $600,000 endowed $30,000 annually

Most of our doctoral students go on to teach in colleges and universities where they become the next generation of scholar/teachers. Some, however, seek employment in alternative careers, such as publishing and foundation work. We would like to do more for those who seek alternative careers. An endowed internship program for our doctoral students would allow us to enhance the opportunities for professional development of our graduate students by providing paid internships at the University of Michigan Press or at new on-line database companies such as ProQuest, located here in Ann Arbor. An endowment of $600,000 will provide $30,000 which will fund an otherwise unpaid summer internship for one student.

Mid-career Faculty Fellowships $1 million endowed $50,000 annually

Fellowships allowing faculty a semester of research support will foster an environment more conducive to top-flight research, enhance faculty quality, and help recruit top faculty. A gift of $1 million will endow mid-career faculty research fellowships. A gift of $50,000 annually will fund one semester of faculty research.

Department Strategic Fund $100,000 annually

Expendable, undesignated gifts are extraordinarily important to the continuing success and growth of the Department. Contributions to the Strategic Fund make it possible to meet unexpected needs and challenges such as:

- Seed funding for faculty projects
- Sponsorship of distinguished international visitors
- International conferences highlighting the Department's scholarship ($25,000 per conference)
- Innovative curriculum development and integration of information technology into our courses
- Publication subventions

The Department Strategic Fund can be endowed for $2 million to provide ongoing flexible support for the Department's priorities.

All donors will be eligible for Presidential Society Recognition opportunities, including the President's Club ($15,000), the Tappan Society ($50,000) and the Hutchins Society ($100,000).

English Contact

The Chair of the Department and the staff of LSA Development would be happy to discuss any of these options with you. The liaison officer for English in LSA Development is Peggy Burns. Peggy's contact information is as follows:

Peggy Burns
Assistant Dean LSA Advancement
Direct: (734) 998-7331
Assistant: Deb Koscielny, (734) 998-7324
Email: pegburns@umich.edu
Department Liaison: English/MFA and Honors

LSA Development, Marketing & Communications
College of LSA
524 South Main Street
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48104-2921
P.734.998.6255
F.734.998.6250

Or, if you prefer, you could contact the gift officer responsible for your region of the country. To learn more about them, please visit the following webpage: *http://www.lsa.umich.edu/lsa/alumni/contact/*

The University of Michigan
Dept. of English Language & Literature
3187 Angell Hall
Ann Arbor MI 48109-1003

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The University of Michigan

Department of English

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