

## Jonathan Peale Bishop

October 27, 1927 – January 22, 2010

Jonathan Peale Bishop was born in Paris, and spent part of his childhood in France, where his father, the poet John Peale Bishop, was living the expatriate writer's life. It wasn't until 1933 that the family moved back to the States, where Jonathan attended the Middlesex School before entering Harvard College in 1944. He broke off his undergraduate studies in 1945 when he was drafted into the Army, and served as a medical technician on troop ships in the Atlantic and Pacific theaters for a couple of years before returning to college. After graduating, he earned a doctorate at Harvard in 1956 with a dissertation on Victorian travel writing. He taught at Amherst and at UCLA before joining the Cornell faculty in 1961, where he remained a vivid presence in the English Department and in the larger Writing Program until his retirement in 1999.

In conversations, as in the classroom, Jonathan was intensely declarative. Words like “perhaps” or “apparently” – necessities, one would think, of East Coast Elite Intellectual discourse – were not part of his lexicon. He could be funny, ironical, or whimsically extravagant; he could shape subtly inflected propositions, but always in the declarative mode, as sayings he stood behind. This was invigorating for his students and colleagues, and not a little daunting. One of those colleagues recently wrote of him, “He was the single most conscientious-least careerist-academic I ever met; with a heart so purely willing that it was almost scary. He believed in the truth, found only part of it in British and American literature, and went looking for it everywhere else, whether he ever got a raise or not.”

It was this intensity of purpose that no doubt led him from an early interest in the transcendental imaginings of writers like Wordsworth and Emerson to his embracing Catholicism in his forties and devoting much of his later writing to exegetical work on Biblical texts and on religious topics like the notion of the Covenant and the meanings of the Eucharistic sacrifice.

In his first book, Emerson on the Soul (1964), Jonathan had traced the ways in which that writer's journal entries were transformed into his more formal lectures and essays, a stylistic exercise that produced the alluring voice, blending philosophical argument and personal reflection, that is Emerson's signature. Jonathan would later refer rather breezily to this work as “my tenure book, *Emerson...on the whole*,” but his engagement with Emerson's prose shaped his life as a writer. His own journal entries – he filled many notebooks with them – became the source for five subsequent books – Something Else (1972), Who is Who (1975), The Covenant: A Reading (1982), Some Bodies: The Eucharist and its Implications (1992), and In time (1999) – each at once speculative and autobiographical.

Jonathan read in order to write, and his reading had an astonishing range. In the ten years it took him to compose Some Bodies, for example, he read the Church Fathers and dozens of theologians and scholars of the Eucharist. That was to be expected, but he also read – and incorporated into his argument – works by scientists (on the Big Bang, on cellular evolution), by philosophers (from Parmenides and Plato to Merleau-Ponty and Foucault), by theorists of metaphor (Max Black, Paul Ricoeur and Jonathan's Goldwin Smith neighbor, Dick Boyd), by historians like Ernst Kantorowicz and critics like M.H. Abrams, by feminist scholars of the body (Elaine Scarry,

Luce Irigaray), by poets like Richard Wilbur and Seamus Heaney. And invariably he would mine his journals for pertinent anecdotes: *Some Bodies* ends with two stories, one about a recent walk around Walden Pond, and the other about his “burial at sea,” in Beebe Lake, of a dead goldfish he found floating in a Kendal aquarium.

During his time at Amherst, Jonathan had taught in that college’s idiosyncratic freshman writing course, one which eschewed textbooks and rhetorical exercises in favor of assignments that obliged students to report and reflect on their experiences, another Emersonian project of a sort. So, soon after his arrival at Cornell, Jonathan and two colleagues launched a similar course. In its first years, in the early Sixties, just before Freedom Summer and the anti-war protests began to focus the energies of many undergraduates, being asked to think and write about their time here at Cornell struck a chord, spoke to their hopes and disaffections, and produced some fine work. The course, “Writing from Experience,” became popular, grew to numerous sections, and remained among the Department’s offerings for decades, much of that time directed by Jonathan himself. His investment in autobiography, his particular way of conceiving of its value, can be said to have influenced thousands of freshmen, not to mention the graduate students and faculty who came to teach in the program. In addition to his work in the Writing Program, he was known as an exhilarating and demanding teacher of courses in American literature and culture.

Jonathan was a long-time member of the Cornell Catholic Community, where he is remembered both for his good works—the sabbatical term he spent in Rochester, assisting at the Catholic Worker shelter, his dependable presence at Ithaca food kitchens—and for the lucidity of the homilies he delivered, explicating the weekly Biblical text, at Sunday services at various local retirement homes. His colleagues in the English Department will remember him for the energy and thought he brought to his teaching and as a writer of compelling prose and an exceptionally learned and subtle literature intelligence.

Jonathan is survived by his brother Robert, his former wife, the novelist Alison Lurie, their three sons, John, Jeremy and Joshua, and grandchildren Wells, Susanna, and Jonathan A. Bishop, currently a student at Cornell.

*Written by Neil Hertz, Chairperson; Katherine Gottschalk, Reeve Parker*