



## **Meyer Howard “Mike” Abrams**

July 23, 1912 – April 21, 2015

M. H. Abrams, Class of 1916 Professor of English, Emeritus, who died in Ithaca at age one hundred and two, was one of the most distinguished and influential scholars produced by the American academy and an almost mythical figure in literary studies, and not just because he remained intellectually active to the end (Norton published his *The Fourth Dimension of a Poem* in his one hundredth year). He was the inventor and general editor of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, the first and dominant anthology presenting the literary canon, and for nearly fifty years he presided over the gradual expansion of that canon. He was also, as Wayne Booth of the University of Chicago put it, “the best historian of ideas, as ideas relate to literature and literary criticism, that the world has known.”

A beloved teacher of undergraduates and mentor to graduate students, Mike spent his entire academic career at Cornell and was a fervent Cornellian: a devoted supporter of Cornell athletics, and a generous benefactor of the Johnson Museum and the Kroch Rare Book and Manuscript Library.

Mike Abrams was born in 1912--long enough ago to remember hearing a speech by President Wilson. The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, he grew up in the seaside town of Long Branch, New Jersey, where his father owned a house painting business. During his school years his parents insisted that he concentrate on his studies above all else, and while photographs of the time show a muscular young man, his interest in sports did not develop until his college years. He was, from his earliest days, an avid reader; in an interview in 2001, he recalled:

“I used to devour books as a kid; it never occurred to me that I would write one. There was a time when I read three novels a day. I read fast; sometimes if I really enjoyed a novel I read it three times in one day, the same novel. It was during the Depression that I was in college, and

there was no living to be made in anything really, so I thought I'd start doing something I enjoyed rather than something I didn't enjoy.”

He entered Harvard in 1930 as a scholarship student, and in 1934 won the prize for best honors thesis in English, which Harvard published in a run of 350 copies. *The Milk of Paradise*, later published with a new preface in the 1960s, concerned the relationship between opium and the literary imagination in several romantic writers.

Graduating from Harvard in 1934, Mike won a Henry Fellowship to study at Cambridge University with the critic I. A. Richards and attended seminars by such distinguished philosophers as Ludwig Wittgenstein, C. D. Broad, and G. E. Moore. Mike's celebrated gifts of stylistic clarity and precise distinctions may owe something to virtues emphasized by British philosophers. During his year in England, he travelled to Germany and Italy and witnessed firsthand the rise of fascism.

Mike returned to Harvard for graduate work in English and in 1937 married Ruth Gaynes, also from Long Branch. He received his Ph.D. from Harvard in 1940 with a dissertation, now in Kroch Library, that took off from Richards's interest in the functioning of metaphors in systems of thought by examining the metaphors structuring romantic critical theory. The two fat volumes of “The Mirror and the Lamp” would eventually be transformed into a revolutionary and prize-winning book.

In 1941, when the U.S. entered World War II, Mike joined the team of the Psycho-Acoustic Laboratory in Cambridge, under the direction of the Harvard psychologist S. S. Stevens, which was charged by the government to solve the problem of vocal communications in noisy environments. Mike and his colleagues developed the “Abel, Baker, Charlie” code, which consists of English words least likely to be garbled or mistaken for each other. After the war, when the group's reports were no longer secret, Mike published two of them--his first professional publications, which as it turned out, were in a scientific rather than a literary field. This work in acoustics eventually contributed to the book he published in his 100<sup>th</sup> year, *The Fourth Dimension of a Poem*.

In 1945, Mike was offered a job as assistant professor of English at Cornell. He recalls: “the only thing I knew about [Cornell] came from a Saturday Evening Post article, a double-page spread showing the outside platform in Willard Straight which is still in use. It displayed tables with Cinzano umbrellas and undergraduates sitting there luxuriously sipping a tall drink, a view of Cayuga Lake in the distance. I said to myself, ‘Is this Eden, or an American university?’ So I decided to go for an interview, and was charmed by the place.” As he told it, he phoned his wife Ruth to tell her the news: “Ruthie, we’re moving to Ithaca.” She replied, “Where’s Ithaca?”

As a Cornell professor, Mike set to work developing the material in his doctoral thesis. Mike's memory of writing what became one of the foundational works of twentieth-century literary scholarship involved Cornell colleagues, such as David Daiches, Robert M. Adams, Morris Bishop, Arthur Mizner, and of course Vladimir Nabokov: “When you walked into the hall [of Goldwin Smith] you could hear a typewriter clicking at one end and a typewriter clicking at the other—with the smell of my pipe smoke in the middle . . . At one end was Bob Adams, who

never stopped typing; at the other end was David Daiches, who stopped typing only to talk once in a while. And they drove you crazy because you knew they were just churning out this fine prose.”

*The Mirror and the Lamp*, when it was published in 1952, met with immediate acclaim. (A Modern Library survey ranked it 25<sup>th</sup> among the one hundred most important books of the twentieth century). The book begins, “The development of literary theory in the lifetime of Coleridge was to a surprising extent the making of the modern critical mind.” “Surprising” because Abrams argues that critical theories usually thought of as post-Romantic, if not anti-Romantic, have their roots in the Romantic period. Specifically, he argued that a paradigm shift had occurred during the early nineteenth century from what he called mimetic theories of literature to expressive theories. The book presented itself as the history of an intellectual transformation, but, more important, in outlining different possible theories of literature, for the first time it made the study of literary theory and theories an explicit topic of academic inquiry.

His second major scholarly work, *Natural Supernaturalism* (1973), which Mike frequently claimed to prefer to *The Mirror and the Lamp*, is a grand synthesis of Romantic literature and philosophy, exploring in particular the secularization of structures of religious thought as an animating force in nineteenth century culture. In a discussion moving across theology, poetry, history, and philosophy, and ranging from St. Augustine to Hegel and from Blake to Carlyle, Mike foregrounds Wordsworth’s claim, as he undertook to write an autobiographical epic, that the great “fables” of religious poetry--paradise, heaven, and hell--have their ultimate existence “within the mind of man,” which alone is capable of achieving “a new heaven and a new earth.” That faith, Mike argues, enabled Wordsworth and his contemporaries to produce works that conceive of the extraordinary in the ordinary and the supernatural in the natural.

Another contribution to critical theory is his *Glossary of Literary Terms*, which he continued to edit and augment into his nineties; its modest title conceals succinct essays on all the topics germane to thinking about literature and culture. The most recent edition contains an entry on rap, testimony to his continuing intellectual openness.

A number of Mike's essays over nearly seventy years have become classics; collections include *The Correspondent Breeze*, *Doing Things with Texts*, and *The Fourth Dimension of a Poem*. A set of lectures delivered to celebrate his life's work were published (along with his lengthy response, delivered without notes at the end of the conference) as *High Romantic Argument*.

In his nineties he developed a new interest in the acoustic aspects of poems and how a reader’s experience of articulating the poem’s sounds contributes to its effects. He called this “the fourth dimension of a poem,” and beautifully performs these effects in readings available on YouTube. The phrase became the title of his final collection, *The Fourth Dimension of a Poem*, published on the occasion of his hundredth birthday, when he also appeared before an audience of students, colleagues, and other admirers.

But what made Mike Abrams famous the world over is the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, the first anthology of its kind and the widest-selling literary anthology in use today.

Mike assembled a team of editors, including his colleagues Robert M. Adams and David Daiches, and brought out the first edition in 1961, expecting to sell perhaps ten thousand copies; instead, the anthology sold a hundred thousand in its first year and eight million copies subsequently. In the course of eight editions, the two volumes of the anthology have expanded to more than six thousand pages, as Mike oversaw the gradual expansion of the literary canon, adding more women and minority authors in every edition. He consistently supported a flexible approach to canon-formation and dismissed complaints about "watering down" the quality of approved writers by resisting the implication that literary judgments are a zero-sum game. "It's all good," he liked to put it, referring to both new and old writers in a recent edition. "And Keats is still good no matter who else is included."

When Mike was approached to take on the job of anthologist, he had already inaugurated at Cornell the perfect match for the new publishing project: the course called "The English Literary Tradition." He ended up teaching the survey to several generations of Cornellians. His conception of literature as a human act of transmission was bound up in pedagogy: the conversation of teaching might be said to continue in the conversation of criticism. During the heyday of the New Criticism, which dealt with a poem or novel in isolation, Mike insisted that this approach ignored "a really important aspect of a student's introduction to literature": "the order in which it was written, where you deal with the earlier poets before you deal with the later poets, who set themselves up against their predecessors or in important ways learned from them." He loved to teach, and he loved being with young people; in return, he was consistently popular among students. His lectures, unsurprisingly, were models of clarity and compression; he never rushed, never ran over time. But there was nothing cut-and-dried about his presentation, and when he read the texts, in his richly expressive but slightly understated baritone, he demonstrated that reading aloud is also a form of interpretation and understanding.

Among his most famous students are the literary critics Harold Bloom, Sandra Gilbert, Gayatri Spivak, and E. D. Hirsch, and the novelists Thomas Pynchon, and William Gass. Asked about his students, Mike replied, "I've been fortunate in having so many good students who've done so many good things, and I certainly wouldn't want to single anyone -- or two, or three -- out."

Though one of the preeminent critics of the century, Mike Abrams had none of the qualities we associate with academic superstars. He did not fly around the country speaking at conferences or in prestigious lecture series; he declined visiting professorships, preferring to remain at home in Ithaca. He did not seek academic power, either within the university or in professional organizations. He did not want a center of some sort to direct, though he worked to help found the National Humanities Center in North Carolina. He was never president of anything. And at Cornell he was a benign figure, supportive even of colleagues whose approaches to literature differed from his own. As one of his admirers put it, he didn't seem to notice how distinguished he was. What struck one in conversation were qualities of generosity, modesty, dignity, responsiveness, self-deprecation and a willingness to be amused. It took some effort, in the aura of his charm, to remind yourself of his standing in the world.

Part of Mike's legendary quality had to do with the longevity of his energy and creativity. He was a great supporter of Cornell sports, especially the football team, and in his nineties was made honorary co-captain and allowed to call the toss of the coin at homecoming. He claimed never to

have missed a home game until his one hundredth year. This “unreconstructed humanist,” as he called himself, was an incurable optimist, not only about the prospects of Cornell football but also about Ithaca weather. In a fitting culmination of his career, he was able to travel to Washington in 2014 to receive the National Humanities Medal from President Obama.

*Written by Jonathan Dwight Culler, chair; Paul Lincoln Sawyer, Roger Stephen Gilbert*