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This portrait of the legendary Mike Abrams consists of a collection of news stories and photographs over the years that describe his interests – including his devotion to both teaching and scholarship and his role as citizen-at-large at Cornell and internationally.

M. H. Abrams

at Cornell University



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Meyer Howard Abrams

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Perfect bound copies of *High Romantic Argument* may be ordered from The Cornell University Press.

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Note: Some supplementary materials may be found in the ROM section of the companion DVD disc 1 using a computer; these are *not* accessible using a DVD Player and TV.

This book and the DVD were produced by

J. Robert Cooke

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Ithaca, NY, USA

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Preface

These articles provide a glimpse into Mike Abrams' role in and impact on the Cornell Community and on the larger community of scholars. We present them as a tribute to Mike Abrams in celebration of his continuing role as an inspiring teacher, a highly influential scholar and literary critic, and as a person who played a major role in defining the great literature studied by students throughout the world.

An important part of this portrait of Mike Abrams can best be told through multimedia, so an associated 2-disc DVD has been produced so you might see and hear him giving public lectures and being interviewed.

Contents of the Associated DVD

Disc 1:

Presentations sponsored by the Cornell University Library and Kendal at Ithaca

The James Joyce Collection at Cornell University by M. H. Abrams, introduced by Karen Smith. Kendal at Ithaca, August 16, 2005. [0:51] Note: An audio recording of a related talk presented at Goldwin Smith Hall, with additional comments on the history of the Cornell library, is also included and its transcript is in this book.

M. H. Abrams: Interview by Jonathan Culler and Neil Hertz. Kendal at Ithaca, February 18, 2008. [1:07]

Introductions by David Skorton and Jonathan Culler at the Inaugural Lecture for the M. H. Abrams Distinguished Visiting Professorship on January 29, 2007. [4:14+3:53]

The DVD-ROM includes PDF files of the following books (used by permission):

This book (*M. H. Abrams at Cornell University*)

Lipking, Lawrence I. (ed.) *High Romantic Argument: Essays for M.H. Abrams*, Cornell University Press, 1981.

Abrams, M. H. *The Milk of Paradise: The Effect of Opium Visions on the Works of DeQuincey, Crabbe, Francis Thompson, and Coleridge*. New York: Octagon Books, 1970, pp. 1-86.

Disc 2:

Presentations in 2008 sponsored by the School of Continuing Education and Summer Sessions

A Conversation with M. H. Abrams: An Interview by Glenn Altschuler, May 2008. [0:48]

On Reading Poems Aloud by M. H. Abrams, introduced by Charles W. Jermy, Jr. Statler Auditorium, July 16, 2008. [1:17]

Editor's Note: For an additional video of M. H. Abrams, download The Corson Legacy: An Overview, with Walter F. LaFeber, July 24, 2008. [0:33]

<http://ecommons.library.cornell.edu/handle/1813/13191>

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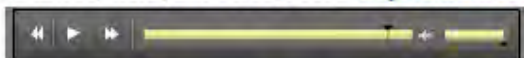
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Note: When viewed using Adobe Reader 9.0 or higher, a recording of the Abrams lecture (cf. p. 37) may be heard. Just click to reveal the control panel with its play/pause and scrub bar (to set the playback starting point). Use keyboard or mouse to adjust the volume.

You may download a free copy of Adobe Reader 9 (or whatever version is current) at <http://www.adobe.com/acrobat>

Alternatively, you may play one of the audio files (aiff and mp3) contained in the DVD-ROM of disc 1.

Editor's Note: The following invited lecture was presented in Goldwin Smith Hall on June 9, 2005, in conjunction with the exhibit of Cornell's James Joyce Collection, "James Joyce: From Dublin to Ithaca," organized by the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Hirshland Exhibition Gallery, Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University. See also the 2005 North American James Joyce Conference, "Return to Ithaca," held June 14-18, 2005. <http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/joyce/index.html> and <http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/joyce/events.html>



If using Acrobat Reader 9 or higher, click the controls at left to hear the lecture.

This lecture was presented again on August 16, 2005, for his neighbors at Kendal at Ithaca; a video recording of that presentation is contained on the DVD associated with this project.

A Professor's Hobby ... Prof. Abrams Pursues Hobby

The Cornell Sun. March 9, 1956. This is the first in a series of articles on "Professors and their Hobbies."

By MARSHA ROBERTS

It was after investigating the source of "strange musical sounds" from down the hall that Professor M. H. Abrams of the English Department first became interested in the recorder. This was five or six years ago and the sounds were coming from the room of one of Abrams' colleagues.

Now, Professor Abrams plays the recorder often with a group of faculty members, sometimes alone and annually for his English 251 class. He has also lectured to University students concerning the history of the instrument.

The recorder, the professor noted, was practically unknown until about 50 years ago. It became obsolete in the 19th century. Before that, it was the chief wind instrument through the 17th century and goes back as far [as] the middle ages.

Since it has been revived in this country, it has also become extremely popular in Germany, England and Switzerland. Some of the greatest contemporary composers such as Hindemith and Vaughn Williams are composing pieces for the recorder. In the Baroque and Classical periods Bach, Purcell and Haydn composed for this flute-like instrument, Abrams continued.

The recorder was the predecessor of the present flute. However, it is played vertically to the plane of the face instead of being cross blown like the flute, Professor Abrams explained. Its whistle-like mouth piece makes it "awfully easy to learn," contrary to the flute, but difficult to play well, he noted.

Since it is easy to get sounds from the recorder almost immediately, it is increasingly being taken up by people who want to play an instrument. For example, many of the students in Music 101 took it up as a project and got very satisfying results from it.

The recorder is also being used more often in orchestras, especially in Baroque ensembles, Abrams stated, along with lutes and viols. It is "not a second best modern instrument, but an instrument of its own right," professor Abrams asserted.

In connection with his personal experiences with the recorder, Professor Abrams related an incident that occurred when he had just begun to play. He often rehearsed with the professor who had first inspired him, during their lunch hours. One Friday afternoon when the two of them were playing duets, they became especially engrossed in their practice when suddenly Professor Abrams remembered that he had a two o'clock class to teach. It was then 2:30.

With tea cup and recorder in hand, he rushed down the hall and found a fair sized group of loyal freshmen still waiting for him. They immediately inquired about the unusual instrument that he was still carrying. When he told them a little about the recorder, they asked him to play something for them. Since they had been so patient for thirty minutes, Professor Abrams thought it only fair to oblige.

Much to the delight and amusement of the group, there was an answering tune heard from the distance, echoing each of his phrases. He discovered that the other Professor, thinking that Abrams had returned to his office, was playing his recorder in his office across the hall, amusing himself by imitating the music of his colleague.

The class insisted that Professor Abrams invite his friend in to play some duets. "We gave them a hot chorus of Dinah," Abrams said with a broad grin.

Professor Abrams taught his daughter to play the recorder when she was seven years old. Although she is now preoccupied with the piano, he is confident that she will return to the recorder eventually.

One of the recorder's main virtues, Abrams continued, is that it can be practiced at home or even in a dormitory without bothering anyone. Because of this quality the French call it "la flute douce," Professor Abrams stated.

Humanities Council Scheduled for Cornell

Ithaca Journal. Oct. 29, 1962, p. 7.

Meyer Abrams, Cornell University professor of English and a noted literary scholar, will deliver the first lecture in the Whiton Lecture Series of Cornell's Humanities Council Thursday afternoon, Nov. 1.

Prof. Abrams, who holds the Frederic J. Whiton Professorship in the Department of English, will speak at 4:15 p.m. in Room 120 of Ives Hall on "English Romanticism: the Spirit of the Age."

He will be the first in the 1962-63 series of Frederic J. Whiton Lectures. The next two lectures will bring Sir Isaia[h] Berlin, Fellow of All Souls' College at Oxford University, and Henry Peyre, who is Sterling Professor of French Literature at Yale University, to the Cornell campus to discuss "Joseph de Maistre and the Origins of European Fascism" and "Literature and Sincerity" Nov. 28 and Dec. 12.

Prof. Abrams, an authority on 18th and 19th Century literature, literary criticism and the history of ideas, is the author of "The Mirror and the Lamp," published in 1953. This book was cited by critics and professors as one of the five works published in the last 30 years which "have contributed most to an understanding of literature;" it also received the Phi Beta Kappa Christian Gauss Prize in 1954.



Meyer Abrams

He is at present pursuing his study of English romanticism and will deliver, on this topic, the Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto during the fall of 1963.

Professor Abrams received his bachelor of arts, master of arts and doctor of philosophy degrees at Harvard University; he has also studied at Cambridge University, England. Before joining the Cornell faculty in 1945 he taught and did research at Harvard University. At Cornell he was appointed full professor in the Department of English in 1953 and appointed to the Frederic J. Whiton Professorship in 1960. He has received a number of research and study grants, among them the Henry Fellowship to Cambridge University; a Rockefeller Postwar Fellowship; and a Ford Fellowship - the Fund for the Advancement of Education.

He has served as Fulbright lecturer at the Universities of Cambridge and Malta, and the latter university made him an honorary member of its faculty of arts. He studied under Guggenheim Fellowships during 1958 and 1960-61.

Editor's note: The following report played a strategically important role at Cornell University during a period of great political instability arising from campus unrest at Cornell and at many campuses throughout the nation in 1969. This report on the academic responsibilities of the Cornell faculty, was drafted by a group of senior faculty that had frequent meetings at the home of M. H. Abrams and was chaired by Nobel laureate Hans Bethe; it articulated the faculty's fundamental responsibility for academic matters. That is, the faculty's core role would not be transferred to the students or to others inside or outside the university. To this day this remains a core policy and is embedded in *The University Faculty Handbook*.

This report was adopted by the University Faculty on September 24, 1969, and appeared in the first issue of the newly created *Cornell Chronicle*.

The Academic Responsibilities of the Faculty

Cornell Chronicle. 1969, 1(1)2 &
University Faculty Handbook, 7th edition, Appendix I

The major obligations of a free university are to communicate and extend knowledge, to subject to continuous critical scrutiny and transmit man's intellectual and cultural inheritance, and to provide conditions in which students are stimulated to explore, to challenge, and to learn. The effective conduct of these enterprises is only possible in a climate of understanding, good will, and the toleration of diverse views. Such a climate requires general consent about the distribution of the main areas of responsibility among faculty, students, and administration and the determination on the part of all of these groups to maintain the conditions essential to a free university.

The elemental relationship within a university is that between teachers and students, and this distinction in role indicates the appropriate division of responsibilities between these two constituencies. To the students belongs a major voice in determining and applying the rules of community order and in planning the broad spectrum of facilities and activities which determine the quality of social and cultural life on the campus. The major responsibility of the teachers, on the other hand, lies in the academic province: to set and maintain the highest possible educational and scholarly standards and levels of achievement, to embody these values in their teaching and counseling, and to uphold the conditions of free enquiry both for their students and for their colleagues.

All essential operations of the university, however, are of importance to all members of the community. While the particular aim of this report is to define the academic responsibilities of the faculty, it must be understood that students also have a legitimate concern in this province, and that it is the obligation of the faculty to remain sensitive and responsive to their needs. A major task of the university, at this point in Cornell history, is to develop procedures which will promote full and free communication between faculty, students, and administration, and will ensure to students adequate procedures for voicing their considered judgment, both on academic policies and on academic practices.

The Bylaws of Cornell University allocate academic duties to the separate faculties of the various units but reserve matters bearing on overall educational policy to the University Faculty as a whole. Article XIV, Section 3 (as of 1963):

Subject to the authority of the University Faculty on all matters affecting general educational policy, it shall be the duty of each separate college or school to determine the entrance requirements for its own students; to prescribe and define courses of study for them; to determine the requirements for such degrees as are offered to students under its jurisdiction; to recommend to the Board such candidates for degrees as may have fulfilled the requirements therefor; to enact and enforce rules for the guidance and supervision of its students in their academic work; and in general to exercise jurisdiction over all other educational matters in the particular college or school.

Following is a more detailed description of the various functions which must fall within the responsibility of the teachers and investigators who constitute the faculty:

1. Faculty Appointments

The primary decision on the appointment or promotion of faculty members, both to junior and tenure positions, is to be made by an appropriate group of the faculty, subject to approval by the University administrative officers concerned, and by the Board of Trustees where applicable.

Comments:

- a) It is the responsibility of each department to determine considered student opinions about faculty members who are eligible for promotion to tenure. These opinions should be available to the body of the faculty responsible for the primary decision, and should be transmitted in writing to the dean, the ad hoc committee, and the provost.
- b) We consider highly desirable the democratic procedure for faculty appointments or promotion to tenure now in use in many parts of the university. Initial recommendation is made by a small group of faculty members in the immediate area of the candidate's interest. The major decision is made by the faculty members of the department involved (or, in the case of small schools, of the whole school) who have the same or higher rank as that to which the candidate is to be appointed. Tenure appointments are then scrutinized by an ad hoc committee, and must be approved by the dean, provost and Board of Trustees.
- c) It is a continuing responsibility of each department to maintain the highest possible standards of teaching and counseling among all ranks of the teaching staff.

2. Admissions

The determination of admissions policy and the supervision of procedures for admitting students to Cornell are the responsibility of the faculties of the various colleges and schools within the university.

Comments:

- a) The Bylaws of Cornell University (Article XIV.3) defines an area of responsibility in admissions for the University Faculty as a whole, as well as for the faculties of the separate units, by specifying that "the duty of each separate college or school faculty to determine the entrance requirements for its own students" is "subject to the authority of the University Faculty on all matters affecting general educational policy."
- b) The various faculties may choose to delegate the actual procedures in recruiting and admitting students to committees which include nonfaculty members.
- c) The faculty encourages methods for discovering and recruiting able students who have been disadvantaged by their social circumstances or by the inadequacy of the schools they have attended. These methods include: (1) facilitating the admission of students who have demonstrated their abilities in two-year community and junior colleges; (2) making reasonable allowances in admitting first-year students to take into account deficiencies in their preparation; (3) conducting remedial and tutorial programs to compensate for deficiencies in preparation.
- d) Advice and guidance on admissions policies, as well as on the procedures for administering both standard and special admissions programs, should be sought from all qualified sources, including students already on campus. Procedures need to be established to ensure ready access to student judgment on these matters.

3. Academic Standards

Subject to applicable curricular or sequential constraints, the content and academic level on which a given course is taught is set by the professor teaching it. In the case of sequential courses, prerequisites may be set by the department.

The University Faculty devises and adopts university-wide systems of grading the students' scholastic achievement. Within this framework the methods of rating student performance in a given course are set by the professor teaching it.

Comments:

- a) High standards of teaching cannot be maintained without high levels of student performance. Procedures for rating scholastic achievement should contribute to student motivation and self-evaluation in the interest of promoting academic excellence.
- b) Grading systems must be sufficiently specific to permit differentiated ratings, yet sufficiently flexible to allow experimentation by student and teacher. They should also be adaptable to the evaluation of students in non-standard study situations, such as independent study, group efforts of the discussion or project type, or instruction in residential colleges.
- c) In any given course the particular ways of rating student achievement in that course and the content and academic level of that course should be clearly explained at the start.
- d) The faculty should be open to student opinion on alterations and improvements in the conduct of courses.

4. Curricula, Degree Requirements, and Programs of Study

The faculty of each college, school, or separate academic department, division, or center is responsible for and shall approve curricula, degree programs, and, where relevant, requirements for a departmental major.

Comments:

- a) Where more than one college, school, department, division, or center are concerned, such responsibility and authority shall be jointly exercised. Where general educational policy is involved, such responsibility and authority shall be exercised by the University Faculty.
- b) The faculty recognizes the importance of keeping and bringing the appropriate courses in contact with the conditions and problems of the contemporary world. Accordingly, it must be alert to desirable changes in material, to the possibility of new courses, and to innovations in teaching methods.
- c) Students have an important role in curriculum planning and should participate in the work of curriculum committees.
- d) Experimentation with courses and seminars conducted primarily by students is encouraged. The question of credit for such courses remains a faculty responsibility.
- e) It is anticipated that degree programs, or requirements for a departmental major, will remain reasonably well defined, especially in professional and semi-professional areas. So far as the nature of a subject permits, however, students should, in consultation with their faculty advisors, have flexibility in developing their own programs of study.
- f) The faculty recognizes its obligation to counsel students as individuals.

5. Research

Original work is an integral part of the activity of a faculty member. Subject only to the broad constraints of departments and overall university policies, the topic of research or the area of creative endeavor should be the free choice of the individual or of groups of cooperating faculty members.

Comments:

- a) Support for research should be sought, or unsolicited grants accepted, only for subjects which are of interest to faculty members, or which fall under the recognized obligations of particular faculty members.
- b) Increased efforts should be made, wherever faculty interest allows, to obtain support for research directly concerned with social and environmental problems.

- c) Wherever feasible, research should be of a nature which generates appropriate topics for graduate students' theses and for undergraduate projects.
- d) All research contracted for by the university or done by individuals as part of their university duties must be unclassified.
- e) Consultation work, whether for government or industry, is restricted by Cornell regulations to an average of one day a week during term time. This regulation should also apply to consultant agreements of faculty with any industry that may move to the Industrial Park.

6. Allocation of Resources

The faculty should have an effective role, in cooperation with the administration, in the planning of major academic changes and the initiation of new programs. Environmental values and planning that affects those values are a legitimate concern of faculty as well as students and administration.

Comments:

- a) The faculty should share in any decision affecting the academic character of the university directly or indirectly. Any major change or new program – or even the cumulative effect of normal growth or contraction – can be of major academic importance because of the complex interrelation of the various parts of the university and the virtual autonomy of many of its units.
- b) The faculty should have a voice strong enough to guard against any undue diversion of resources to nonacademic purposes.
- c) Students have a valid interest in both academic and nonacademic changes and new developments. They should be given a formal role in planning facilities or programs affecting the quality of student life; for example, housing, dining, community relationships and extracurricular activities.

M. H. Abrams
William L. Brown Jr.
Howard Evans
Vernon H. Jensen
Robert S. Pasley
George Winter
Hans A. Bethe, Chairman

Adopted by the University Faculty, September 24, 1969, Records, pp. 3762-69, Appendix A.
<http://theuniversityfaculty.cornell.edu/handbook/APPENDIX1.pdf>

The report was published initially in the first issue of the newly created *Cornell Chronicle*, September 25, 1969, Vol. 1, No.1, p. 2.

Abrams Views Scholarship and Teaching

Cornell Chronicle. 3(27)1&10. March 30, 1972.

The notion of a sharp division between scholarship and teaching just doesn't apply, except in some highly specialized instances, according to M. H. Abrams, the Frederic J. Whiton Professor of English at Cornell. The relationship between scholarship, publication and teaching, Abrams said, is one of reciprocation, of constant feeding back and forth.

"I've never been able to teach any subject without ideas developing that I want eventually to make public for wider distribution and criticism," Abrams said, discussing the development over the past 15 years of his latest book. The book, "Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature," was published last fall by W. W. Norton & Company.

The book was one of nine nominated Sunday for the 1971 National Book Award in the category of Arts and Letters. The winner will be announced April 11. "On the other hand, I've never published anything that I haven't brought to the students in my courses in order to get their reaction and criticism," he said. "They force you to keep your scholarship in touch with realities and to pitch it on a level where it makes sense not only to the specialist but to any intelligent and well-informed reader."

This intellectual exchange doesn't exist with students only, he said, but also with colleagues. In this atmosphere the materials for a book emerge slowly, crude and rough at first, and only gradually achieving refinement and clarification, Abrams said. "A book is a complex product," he said, "of interaction with fellow scholars, your students, your colleagues, your friends. After awhile you begin to wonder how much is really yours."

There is little question that Abrams' earlier book, "The Mirror and the Lamp," is a notable example of scholarship developed in the way he describes. This book, published in 1953, has been judged in a poll of 250 of his peers as one of five "works published within the last thirty years which in the opinion of representative scholars and critics have contributed most to the understanding of literature."

Of course, the final verdict on his latest book is not yet in. However, the book has already been described as a definitive study of the literature and philosophy of the Romantic Age (1789 to 1835), and views that age as a turning point in Western culture. To support that view, the book ranges from the Bible and classical philosophers to intellectual and literary developments in the present times.

A review in the magazine "Wordsworth Circle" concludes with the following: "And, quite apart from its importance for literary and intellectual history, this compendious work will exercise another kind of beneficial influence through its exemplary qualities of learning, integrity, and craftsmanship."

The reviewer, E. D. Hirsch Jr., a professor of English at the University of Virginia and a former Cornell undergraduate, states:

"A bare description of a few of Abrams' themes does no more justice to his book than a bare outline of these structural patterns does to Romantic literature. A hallmark of Abrams' work, notable in 'The Mirror and the Lamp,' and very striking in this more ambitious work, is a talent for combining the virtues of the hedgehog and the fox. (The fox knows many little things; the hedgehog knows one big thing.) In this book, the one big thing that the hedgehog knows is the pattern of transmutations from Christian to Romantic thought. But the fox knows many little things, and peppers every page with apt quotations from the most diverse sources."

Abrams joined the Cornell faculty in 1945 and, as one reviewer stated, "takes his scholarship straight . . . doesn't take part in academic log-rolling . . . doesn't review much . . . and doesn't issue statements on cosmic issues."

What he does do, according to an admiring colleague, is produce scholarly writings that are the embodiments of his studies, his teachings, his life at Cornell. In the preface of his new book he indicates how thoroughly rooted the book is in his milieu.

He writes: “In the third book of *The Prelude*, describing his residence at Cambridge, Wordsworth projected his vision of an ideal university — as A. C. Bradley remarked, instead of working at his studies, he imagined a university in which he would have worked. Suppose one were now to imagine an ideal place for writing a work on Romantic literature. He might envision a study in a commodious old university building surrounded by the studies of scholars, generous of their learning, whose provinces include both ancient and modern literatures and philosophy: a minute’s stroll distant there would be a major research library with a notable collection in the age of Wordsworth, reached by a path commanding a Wordsworthian prospect of hill, wood, lake, and sky. This was in fact my situation in 171 Goldwin Smith Hall, where this book was planned, worked out in lectures and discussions, and largely written. My debt to some of my colleagues and former students I have occasion to acknowledge in the notes; let me express here my obligation to all the others.”

M. H. Abrams Wins Book Award

Ithaca Journal. May 4, 1972.

M. H. Abrams, the Frederic J. Whiton Professor of English at Cornell University, has been awarded the 1971 James Russell Lowell Prize given annually by the Modern Language Assn. of America for the best book of the year on the criticism of literature.

A \$1,000 cash prize goes with the honor given Abrams for his book "Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature."



M. H. ABRAMS

Abrams' book was selected by a panel of three judges from among more than 90 publications considered for the award.

They wrote a citation describing Abrams' book as follows:

"Centrally concerned with the spiral structure of Wordsworth's 'Prelude,' Professor Meyer Abrams' 'Natural Supernaturalism,' by an expository process that corresponds to its theme, circles and spirals out to embrace a vast range of Western literature and thought, especially English and German, and at its highest level unfolds the secular transformation by the Romantics of Christian values and conceptions. Extraordinar[il]y lucid despite the complexity of its subject and the breadth of its substance, remarkable for the identity of its structure and form of its theme, and indispensable for a profound understanding of Romanticism, it is a model of literary scholarship."

A member of the Cornell faculty since 1945, Abrams is also the author of the book, "The Mirror and the Lamp," published in 1953. The book has been judged in a poll of 250 of his peers as one of five "works published within the last thirty years which in the opinion of representative scholars and critics have contributed most to the understanding of literature."

Abrams Elected to Class of 1916 Professorship of English

CU Public Info. June 26, 1973.

ITHACA, N.Y. -- Literary scholar M. H. Abrams has been elected to Cornell University's prestigious Class of 1916 Professorship of English, effective July 1.

He succeeds Francis E. Mineka, a former dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and first holder of the endowed chair established at the 40th reunion of the Class of 1916. Mineka becomes the emeritus holder of the chair upon his retirement June 30.

Abrams joined the Cornell faculty in 1945 and in 1960 was named the University's first Frederic J. Whiton Professor of English Literature. He is an authority on eighteenth and nineteenth century literature, literary criticism and European Romanticism. He is the author of "The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition," which received the Phi Beta Kappa Christian Gauss Prize in 1954, and "Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature," which won the James Russell Lowell Prize in 1972.

Abrams came to Cornell as an assistant professor and was appointed associate professor in 1947. He was promoted to the rank of full professor in 1953.

He received the bachelor's degree in 1934, the master's degree in 1936 and his doctorate in 1940 from Harvard University. In 1934-35, he attended Cambridge University, England, as a Henry Fellow. From 1942 to 1945 he was a research associate in the Psycho-Acoustic Laboratory at Harvard.

In 1963 Abrams was elected to membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and to the American Philosophical Society in 1973. He has been the recipient of two Guggenheim Fellowships, one in 1957 and another in 1960, a Ford Foundation Fellowship in 1952 and a Rockefeller Postwar Fellowship in 1946. In 1953 he was a Fulbright lecturer at the Royal University of Malta, and has been made an honorary permanent member of that faculty. Abrams delivered the Roache Lecture Series at the University of Indiana in 1963 and gave the Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto in 1964. He was a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford University in 1967-68.

Abrams' book, "The Mirror and the Lamp," was cited in 1957 in a poll of 250 critics and professors of literature as one of the five "works published within the last thirty years which ... have contributed most to an understanding of literature." He has also written "The Milk of Paradise" (1934, reprinted 1970), and "A Glossary of Literary Terms" (1957, revised 1970), and has edited "The Poetry of Pope" (1954), "Literature and Belief" (1958), "English Romantic Poets" (1960), "The Norton Anthology of English Literature" (1962, revised 1968), and "Wordsworth: A Collection of Critical Essays" (1972). He is a frequent contributor to literary journals and to collections of critical essays and is on the board of editors of "Cornell Studies in English" and the "Cornell Concordances."

Abrams and his wife, Ruth Gaynes Abrams, live at 512 Highland Rd. They have two daughters, Jane and Judith.

Think Tank For Scholars: Humanities

Denver Post. March 28, 1976. (UPI story)

NEW YORK (UPI) A multimillion-dollar think tank for super scholars in the humanities will rise at Research Triangle Park in North Carolina, the American Academy of Arts and Sciences reported in New York. The National Humanities Center will open in 1978. Initial funding of \$4.5 million has been obtained from corporations, foundations and the state of North Carolina.

GROUPS NAMED

The center will invite distinguished postdoctoral fellows in the humanities, plus government officials, journalists and writers, to tackle urgent problems facing society.

The problems include environmental issues, medical ethics, educational controversies, judicial policy and even foreign and national security policy.

"... The scientific method can unravel the mysteries of the genetic code, but it cannot deal with the moral and ethical questions posed by genetic engineering," the academy noted, giving one example of the type of problem likely for the center's doorstep.

JOINT ANNOUNCEMENT

The announcement was jointly made by academy officials and John Caldwell, president of the Triangle Universities Center for Advanced Studies in North Carolina.

The think tank will be on the campus of the Triangle Universities Center - chartered by the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, Duke University and North Carolina State University.

Research Triangle is within a 12-mile radius of the three universities, and also has attracted corporate, nonprofit and governmental research enterprises.

FROM 3 UNIVERSITIES

Operating funds for the humanities center during the first five years will come from the three universities. Credit for the idea was given to Prof. Morton Bloomfield of Harvard, Prof. Gregory Vlastos of Princeton University, and Prof. Meyer Abrams of Cornell University.

After spending a year at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Palo Alto, the three became interested in developing a similar center for humanistic study. Planning started in 1973. The range of subjects considered in the humanities category include history, literature, all the arts, philosophy, linguistics - and much more.

Symposium Honors Abrams

Cornell Chronicle. 9(29)1-2. April 20, 1978.

The achievements of M. H. Abrams, the Class of 1916 Professor of English, will be the subject of a unique Cornell symposium, "High Romantic Argument," this Friday and Saturday at Cornell's Andrew Dickson White House.

"No member of the Cornell English Department has ever before been honored in this way, and probably none has been more worthy of such recognition," according to Scott B. Elledge, the Goldwin Smith Professor of English at Cornell.

Abrams, who joined the Cornell faculty in 1945, is internationally known for his writing and scholarship and has been frequently honored for his work.

A total of eight lectures will be included in the symposium, which is sponsored by the Society for the Humanities and the Department of English and is open to the public.

"The topics of the lectures are various aspects of Abrams' contributions to the study of the Romantic movement and to the theory of literary criticism," according to Elledge. "The lecturers are friends and former students, who have welcomed this opportunity to honor a scholar from whom they, like thousands of less prominent students around the world, have learned much during the last 35 years."

The speakers at 2 p.m. Friday will be Jonathan Wordsworth of the University of Oxford; Wayne C. Booth, the Pullman Professor of English at the University of Chicago and author of "The Rhetoric of Fiction;" and Geoffrey Hartman, the Karl Young Professor of English at Yale University and author of "Wordsworth's Poetry, 1787-1814."

At 9:30 a.m. Saturday, the speakers will be Jonathan Culler, professor of English composition and literature at Cornell; Thomas McFarland, Distinguished Professor of English at the City University of New York; and Lawrence Lipking, professor of English at Princeton University.

The final session, beginning at 2 p.m. Saturday, will be addressed by E. D. Hirsch, the Kenan Professor of English at the University of Virginia, and Robert M. Adams, professor of English at UCLA and formerly of Cornell.

Editor's Note: The essays described above were published by Cornell University Press. 1981, *High Romantic Argument: Essays for M. H. Abrams*, edited by Lawrence Lipking.

This book may be read online at

<http://ecommons.library.cornell.edu/handle/1813/63>

Printed copies may be ordered from the Cornell University Press:

<http://www.cornellpress.cornell.edu/>

Abrams Work Chronicled

Cornell Chronicle. 9(29)2. April 20, 1978.

(The following material was prepared in conjunction with the symposium by a colleague of Professor Abrams' in recognition of his work and accomplishments.)

Mike Abrams' international fame rests on "The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition" (1953), now a classic in literary history, and one of the three or four books of modern literary criticism that every serious student of literature is likely to have read. It won the Phi Beta Kappa Christian Gauss Prize in 1954; in 1957 a group of Abrams' peers judged it to be one of the five "works published in the last 30 years which...have contributed most to an understanding of literature"; it still is. His encyclopedic "Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature" (1971) is already established as a masterpiece of intellectual history. It won the Modern Language Association's James Russell Lowell Prize in 1972. (Even Abrams' undergraduate honors essay at Harvard, "The Milk of Paradise: The Effect of Opium Visions on the Works of De Quincey and Coleridge" (Harvard University Press, 1934), won a prize; it was reprinted in 1971.)

Abrams' name is probably known to more students and teachers of English literature than that of any other professor of our time. As principal conceiver and general editor of "The Norton Anthology of English Literature" (1962), now in its third edition, Abrams created a text book that has no serious competitor either in scholarship or in popularity. It reflects Abrams' power to combine the discipline of a scholar with the helpfulness of a teacher.

Since his undergraduate days Abrams' intellectual interests have been unusually broad. His achievement would have been impossible without his mastery of German literature and philosophy; nor would he have done so well without his early interest in psychology. Certainly his work would not have been so fully humanistic without his knowledge of philosophy. From an undergraduate college made exciting by the influence of Alfred North Whitehead, Abrams went to Cambridge University to study under I. A. Richards; and after he came to Cornell he studied the works of Wittgenstein and other linguistic philosophers. His devotion to an ideal of broad humanistic study and to a pragmatic, pluralistic use of a variety of approaches to truths has been expressed in institutions as well as in his scholarship and teaching. He was one of the people who first thought of and helped establish what is now the A. D. White Center for the Humanities at Cornell. And more recently he has been involved in the conception and realization of The National Humanities Center, which will open next fall in Triangle Park, N.C.

Cornell has not been unaware of its good fortune in having Abrams on the faculty. In 1960 he became the first Frederic J. Whiton Professor of English, and in 1973 succeeded to the Class of 1916 Professorship. In the University, the Arts College, and his department he is one to whom administrators tend to bring difficult problems, sure that his wisdom, fairness, and loyalty to the University will produce reliable advice.

No one acquainted with Abrams' involvement in the current debate about critical theory, or with the work he has recently been producing for one distinguished lectureship after another, will think of him as having passed his prime. The friends of this modest, soft-spoken man refuse to guess how he feels about the symposium arranged in his honor, but they assume that he is glad it was planned for a weekend when no Cornell athletic teams were scheduled to play at home.¹

¹ Except for women's crew, according to a letter to the editor of the *Cornell Chronicle*. 9(30)4. April 27, 1978.

Homage Paid to Abrams

Cornell Chronicle. 9(30)3. April 27, 1978.



*Jonathan Wordsworth
Oxford University
Exeter College*

M. H. (Mike) Abrams

*Robert M. Adams
University of California
Professor of English*

“No other figure in English studies has ever produced two different and discrete books of such magnitude as ‘The Mirror and the Lamp,’ and ‘Natural Supernaturalism.’ “

Literary critic Thomas McFarland, City University of New York, made this assessment of M. H. Abrams, the Class of 1916 Professor of English at Cornell, and author of the two books, during a symposium in Abrams’ honor here Friday and Saturday. McFarland was among eight scholars who journeyed from as far away as England to deliver papers and critique Abrams’ work.



*Wayne C. Booth
University of Chicago
Pullman Professor of English*

*E. D. Hirsch
University of Virginia
Keenan Professor of English*

Among them (also see sketches) were Geoffrey Hartman, the Karl Young Professor of English, Yale University; Lawrence Lipking, professor of English, Princeton University; and Jonathan Culler, professor of English, Cornell. Wayne C. Booth, Pullman Professor of English, University of Chicago, said, “We wouldn’t be here today if many of us did not see him as representing the best we know in literary history.”

Sketches by Kenneth Evett, professor of art, Cornell.

Library Associates Seeks to Double Membership

Cornell Chronicle. 14(30)1&11. May 12, 1983.

The university's Library Associates is launching a "quiet campaign," in the words of its new chairman, M.H. Abrams, the Class of 1916 Professor of English, "to double its current membership of some 600 over the next few years in an effort to help with an 'ominous situation' facing Cornell libraries."

While alumni and friends of the university have comprised most of the associates' membership since the group was organized in 1941, faculty, parents and even students are also primary targets of the current membership campaign.

Abrams, whose own writings—including "The Mirror and Lamp," a modern classic of literary criticism—are significant holdings for any library, discussed the library in a recent interview.

"We have a tendency to take Cornell's magnificent library for granted, as if it were a natural phenomenon that will, of its own impetus, continue indefinitely. Of course that has never been the case, and it is questionable now more than ever because of the convergence of three factors, with an intensity never seen before in history."

He cited the explosion of printed materials, the inflationary costs of these materials, and a third, insidious factor that is just beginning to be understood by the general public—the mounting deterioration of books and other items in existing collections, particularly books printed since 1870.

Abrams explained that sulphates used in the manufacturing of paper since the latter half of the 19th century are causing books literally to disintegrate on the shelves of libraries throughout the world. Books used only a few times in the past 100 years will actually crumble in a user's hands when finally opened.

The deterioration is so acute in books printed since 1950 that they are not expected to last 50 years, according to experts. Corrective measures are being taken, but they are costly and time consuming, he said.

"Needless to say," Abrams said, "with these kinds of problems facing us, it is going to take the combined efforts of a great many people to maintain the library at its present excellence, not to mention meeting the current and future needs of scientific research and humanistic scholarship."

But this is not the first time the Cornell libraries have faced a crisis. The Library Associates was founded as part of the university's response to what President Edmund Ezra Day described as the "ominous situation of the library" more than 40 years ago. Abrams cited Morris Bishop's assessment of that situation in his "History of Cornell."

"Since the First World War, Cornell's position relative to other university libraries had steadily receded. Everything about the Library was inadequate—the storage, working and reading space, the insufficient, underpaid staff, the care of rare books, the services to undergraduate readers and to researchers. The Librarian, Otto Kinkeldey, speaks of the growing feeling of despair on the campus at the apparent retrogression in library development."

After World War II, however, Cornell gradually recovered its status as one of the great university libraries. Abrams said that "While today most everyone would agree that the library is the absolutely essential aspect of any university, there does not seem to be a general awareness that we have got to take extraordinary measures now or the library will rapidly go down hill again."

It is the development of a heightened and general awareness of the multiplicity and gravity of the problems facing Cornell's libraries that is the primary objective of Library Associates today, Abrams said.

"The needs are acute; the need for financial and moral support and advice over the next 20 years is critical."

"Since its establishment, the Library associates has played a key role in sustaining and enhancing in many ways the phenomenal resurgence of the Cornell libraries," Abrams said.

The general contributions of the group and the individual contributions of its members have been crucial to the quality and variety of the Cornell collection. Arthur H. Dean and his wife, Mary Marden Dean, have led in these contributions, Abrams said.

In addition to Arthur Dean's service as chairman of the associates for more than 15 years, he and Mrs. Dean have made numerous contributions to the library, including the Lafayette papers and the Forrest Bowe collection of Franco-Americana. He also has been very active in the recent development of the library's collection of 20th century American literature.

"It is the devotion of people like the Deans that has made the library what it is today. During his long and illustrious career, as an international lawyer and diplomat as well as 10 years service as chairman of the Cornell University Board of Trustees, Mr. Dean never failed to play an active role in the development of the library," said Abrams.

"This commitment goes beyond the material enhancement of the library and is even more importantly directed to the idea and fundamental significance of books. The biennial undergraduate book collection competition sponsored by the Deans exemplifies a recognition of this factor in general education."

Abrams pointed out that there are four membership categories in the associates: Friends receive all mailings and all regular publications; Sponsors receive, in addition, any special publications and a keepsake; Sustaining Members are entitled to all of the above and a "backstage" tour of the library. Patrons have the same privileges as Sustaining Members, plus the offer of a consultation with a Cornell librarian about personal collections, an invitation to be a guest of the associates at the annual dinner and related special events.

Additional information may be obtained at 201 Olin Library, telephone 256-3393. Abrams said he expects to play a key role in planning and taking part in the associates' programs and special events over the next few years.

One of the more recent events was "A Weekend in Philadelphia" which included two days of cultural and social activities centering around a major exhibit of the paintings of Cornell's Louis Agassiz Fuertes at the Academy of Natural Sciences in Philadelphia and a guided tour of the Rosenbach Museum and Library, also in Philadelphia.

Similar programs are being planned throughout the country, all part of cultivating a growing awareness that a great library is the result of continual community effort!

M.H. Abrams Named Emeritus

Cornell Chronicle. 15(06)5. September 29, 1983.

M.H. Abrams, Class of 1916 Professor of English in the Department of English, College of Arts and Sciences, has been named Class of 1916 Professor of English Emeritus.

Abrams has been a member of the English Department at the university since 1945. An authority on 18th- and 19th-century literature, literary criticism and European Romanticism, he is the author of "The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition," which received the Phi Beta Kappa Christian Gauss Prize in 1954, and "Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature," which won the James Russell Lowell Prize in 1972.

"The Mirror and the Lamp" was cited in 1957 in a poll of 250 critics and professors of literature as one of the five "works published within the last 30 years which have contributed most to an understanding of literature."

Abrams came to Cornell in 1945 as an assistant professor and was appointed associate professor in 1947. He was promoted to the rank of full professor in 1953. In 1960, he became the first Frederic J. Whiton Professor of English Literature and in 1973 succeeded to the Class of 1916 Professorship.

He received the bachelor's degree in 1934, the master's degree in 1936, and the Ph.D. degree in 1940 from Harvard University.

In 1934-35, he attended Cambridge University, England, as a Henry Fellow. From 1942 to 1945, he was a research associate in the Psycho-Acoustic Laboratory at Harvard. He has been awarded the honorary degree Doctor of Humane Letters, by the University of Rochester (1978), Northwestern University (1981) and the University of Chicago (1982).

In 1963 Abrams was elected to membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and in 1972, to the American Philosophical Society. He has been the recipient of two Guggenheim Fellowships, one in 1957, and another in 1960, a Ford Foundation Fellowship in 1952, and a Rockefeller Postwar Fellowship in 1946.

In 1953, he was a Fulbright lecturer at the Royal University of Malta, and has been made an honorary permanent member of that faculty.

Abrams delivered the Roache Lecture Series at the University of Indiana in 1963, the Alexander lectures at the University of Toronto in 1964, the Ewing Lectures at UCLA in 1975, and the Cecil Green Lectures at the University of British Columbia in 1980.

He was Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, in 1967-68. He is a member of the Academy of Literary Studies, an Honorary Senior Fellow at the School of Critical Studies at Northwestern, a member of the Founders' Group of the National Humanities Center, and a member of the Council of Scholars, The Library of Congress. He was a visiting fellow at All Souls College, Oxford University, in 1977.

Library of Congress Publishes Abrams' Essay

Cornell Chronicle. 16(13)12. November 15, 1984.

"Literary Criticism in America: Some New Directions," an essay by M.H. Abrams, the Class of 1916 Professor of English Literature, Emeritus, has been published by The Library of Congress.

Abrams, the author of the modern classic in literary criticism, "The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition," is an original member of the Library's Council of Scholars. Abrams is chairman of the council.

The council is a group of some 25 scholars which "advises The Library of Congress on the Library's collections, investigates topics of importance in American Life, and publishes its findings in its Inventory of Knowledge." Among the original members when the council was founded in 1980 were Henry Kissinger, Archibald MacLeish, and Arthur Schlesinger.

Abrams' essay, along with one by James Ackerman, professor of fine arts at Harvard University, was selected for the second pamphlet of "Occasional Papers of the Council of Scholars." Ackerman's paper is titled, "Interpretation, Response: Suggestions for a Theory of Art Criticism."

Copies of the 55-page pamphlet — "Theories of Criticism: Essays in Literature and Art" — are available free upon request from the Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, DC 20540.

Helen Vendler at The American Academy of Arts and Sciences on December 12, 1984

Meyer Abrams, who is to receive tonight the Humanistic Studies Award of the Academy, is the Class of 1916 Professor of English Literature Emeritus at Cornell University. Mr. Abrams received the A. B., M. A., and Ph.D. from Harvard, and was an instructor at Harvard until he went, after the second World War, as an assistant professor to Cornell University, where he became famous, not only as a professor, but as an ardent advocate of the football team and of life in Ithaca. Mr. Abrams' two pathbreaking volumes, *The Mirror and the Lamp* and *Natural Supernaturalism*, both of them concerned with the turn from the Enlightenment to Romanticism, laid out a bold map of intellectual and aesthetic change, and drew attention in a marked way to the importance of literary theory in studying the evolution of a new poetic. In claiming for Romanticism the highest intellectual, aesthetic, and moral interest, Mr. Abrams continued the Arnoldian project by which the "supernatural" values of the Judaeo-Christian tradition are seen to rephrase themselves in a "natural" ethos, which substitutes, for the ancient dialogue of the soul with God, the dialogue of the ego with created nature. The recent intense resurgence of American interest in British and German Romanticism has sprung in great part from Mr. Abrams' example, and has been carried on by many of his pupils, most notably, perhaps, by Harold Bloom. And we who are awarding a prize tonight to Mr. Abrams should not forget that both of his major books have won major prizes – the Christian Gauss Prize of Phi Beta Kappa went to *The Mirror and the Lamp* in 1954, and the James Russell Lowell Prize of the MLA went to *Natural Supernaturalism*.

Though it is perhaps for scholarly work that scholars are most justly praised and rewarded, I think a word should be said tonight about the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, of which Mr. Abrams is the general editor. That comprehensive and admirable anthology has now ruled the field for over twenty years, and has served to introduce many generations of students to our major British authors, in a way both authoritative and attractive. Those of us who have benefited from Mr. Abrams' scholarly writing are equally grateful to him in the classroom, not only for the Norton Anthology but for his Norton Critical edition of the *Prelude*.

Most recently, Mr. Abrams has entered, in a characteristically penetrating and equable way, into the ongoing debates on literary theory that are now absorbing writers about literature. To these debates he brings his own clear lamp, shedding light where there is frequently little but heat. In recognizing Mr. Abrams' activity as scholar, editor, and critic, the American Academy honors one of its most distinguished members.

M. H. Abrams on Art-As-Such: The Sociology of Modern Aesthetics

BULLETIN The American Academy of Arts and Sciences. Vol. XXXVIII, December 1984. No. 3.

Stated Meeting Announcement: Presentation of the Humanistic Studies Award to M. H. Abrams December 12, 1984 Cambridge, Massachusetts

The 1654th Stated Meeting December 12, 1984 House of the Academy Cambridge, Massachusetts The program for the December Stated Meeting will include the presentation of the Humanistic Studies Award to M.H. Abrams, followed by Mr. Abrams's communication, ART-AS-SUCH: THE SOCIOLOGY OF MODERN AESTHETICS. Mr. Abrams, the Class of 1916 Professor of English Literature Emeritus at Cornell University, describes the focus of his talk as follows:

"In the course of the eighteenth century occurred a total revolution in the conception and systematic theory of art. For some two thousand years, beginning with Aristotle, theory had been limited to a single art, such as poetry or tragedy, and had been implicitly grounded on a construction model. That is, works of art were conceived as things that are made, according to a *techne* or *ars*, for selecting and ordering materials toward achieving preconceived effects on an audience and for adapting them to fulfill diverse social roles. Beginning in the early eighteenth century, however, and by 1790 receiving a complete exposition in Kant's *Critique of Aesthetic Judgment*, hitherto separate arts - especially poetry, music, painting, sculpture, and architecture - came to be treated together as the class of 'the fine arts,' or simply 'art,' on the basis of shared qualities which distinguish them as *sui generis*. These features are posited not on a construction model, but on a contemplation model: a work belonging to the class of art is defined as something to be contemplated, 'disinterestedly' by an isolated observer and for its own sake - that is, as a self-sufficient object, independent of reference to its intended effects or attendant circumstances, and to its truth or utility. Such views have continued, to our own day, to be central concepts in the standard philosophy of art.

"What fostered this Copernican revolution was the rapid spread, beginning in the latter seventeenth century, of a hitherto restricted predilection for connoisseurship, whose vogue for the middle classes was enhanced by its role as a symbol of status. Its result was the invention of a variety of new institutions and arrangements for making one after the other of the separate arts accessible, usually for pay, to an ever-enlarging public. Thus the eighteenth century brought into being, for the first time in history, a literature that depends, not on aristocratic or political patrons, but on wide public sale; public concerts in public concert halls; public museums for viewing paintings and sculptures; enormously popular tours (the very word 'tourist' is an eighteenth-century neologism) to visit great country houses and churches, together with wide-selling books of engraved architectural monuments, originally built to serve a variety of social functions. In each of these new social arrangements, a diversity of human products - ancient and modern, pagan and Christian, sacred and profane - were totally dislocated from their original temporal, cultural, and social milieus and put together in a single museum, concert, book-mart, tour, or book. In this new milieu a great range of hitherto distinct artifacts, despite their patent differences in material medium, occasion, and purposes, were for the first time grouped together as 'the fine arts' - a class of objects which shared the defining feature of being there simply to be attended to and enjoyed for their own sakes, without any reference beyond themselves. In short, what was in fact a new social role (the presentation for public connoisseurship) was interpreted as a shared quality inherent in the art objects themselves, and established as the timeless and universal basis of the new theory of art-as-such - a theory for which, in the mid-eighteenth century, the philosopher Baumgartner coined the term 'aesthetics'."

This Stated Meeting will take place at the House of the Academy on Wednesday, December 12, 1984, beginning at 8:15 p.m. It will be preceded by cocktails at 6:30 and dinner at 7:00.

Abrams Wins AAAS Humanistic Studies Award

Cornell Chronicle. 16(18)7. January 10, 1985.

M. H. Abrams, the Class of 1916 Professor of English Emeritus, at Cornell University, has been presented the Humanistic Studies Award of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences.

It is given in recognition of "highly distinguished contributions in the humanities," including such areas as history, philosophy, and literary studies. The award was established in 1976 and has been presented to only one other person, the literary critic and philosopher Kenneth Burke. Abrams received the award, which includes a medal and \$1,000 in cash, at the December meeting of the AAAS in Cambridge, Mass.

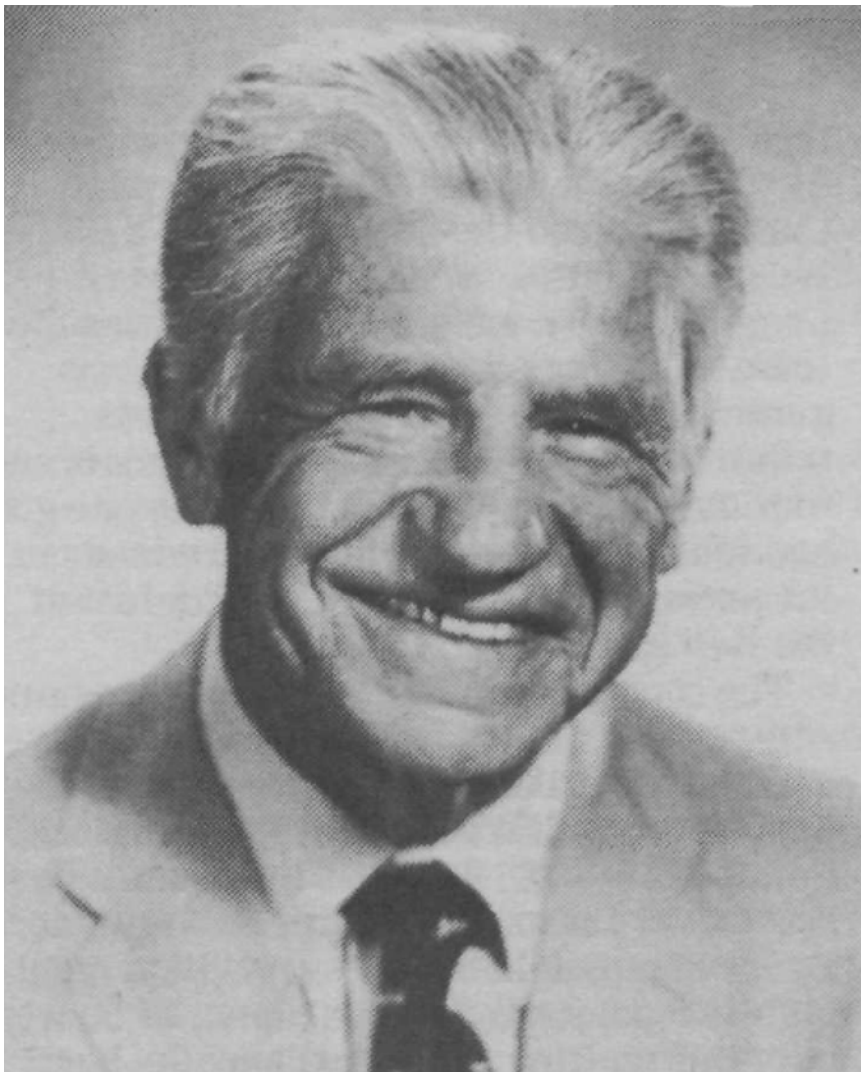
In presenting the award, Helen Vendler, literary critic and professor of English at Harvard University, said: "Mr. Abrams' two pathbreaking volumes, 'The Mirror and The Lamp' and 'Natural Supernaturalism,' both of them con-

cerned with the turn from the Enlightenment to Romanticism, laid out a bold map of intellectual and aesthetic change and drew attention in a marked way to the importance of literary theory in studying the evolution of a new poetic.

"In claiming for Romanticism the highest intellectual, aesthetic, and moral interest, Mr. Abrams continued the Arnoldian project by which the 'supernatural' values of the Judaeo-Christian tradition are seen to rephrase themselves in a 'natural' ethos, which substitutes, for the ancient dialogue of the soul with God, the dialogue of the ego with created nature."

The recent intense resurgence of American interest in British and German Romanticism, Vendler pointed out, has sprung in great part from Abrams' example, and has been carried on by many of his students. "The Mirror and the Lamp" was cited in 1957 in a poll of 250 critics and professors of literature as one of the five "works published within the last 30 years which ... have contributed most to an understanding of literature."

Vendler added that Abrams is general editor of "The Norton Anthology of English Literature," which "has now ruled the field



M.H. Abrams

for over twenty years, and has served to introduce many generations of students to our major British authors in a way both authoritative and attractive."

A member of the Cornell faculty since 1945, Abrams received the bachelor's (1934), master's (1936), and Ph.D. (1940) degrees from Harvard University. He was a Henry Fellow at Cambridge University, England, in 1934-35.

Notables [Fellow of the British Academy]

Cornell Chronicle. 19(40)7. August 4, 1988.

M.H. Abrams, the Class of 1916 Professor Emeritus of English Literature, has been elected a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy, a learned society of humanists and social scientists. In addition, he recently received the Distinguished Scholar Award from the Keats-Shelley Society.

Abrams, a member of the Cornell faculty since 1945, is an authority on 18th and 19th century literature, literary criticism and European Romanticism. He is at work on a new book, "Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Theory," scheduled for publication late this year.

M.H. Abrams: A scholar and critic ahead of his time

Cornell Chronicle. 21(35)7. May 31, 1990.

M.H. Abrams' reputation as a leading scholar on the Romantic period in literature is long established. Now, there is growing recognition that his method of criticism — often overlooked and even discounted at times over the past five decades — has been ahead of its time.

Earlier this month, Abrams received an American Institute of Arts and Letters' 1990 Award for Literature, which includes a \$5,000 cash award. During ceremonies at the institute's headquarters on West 155th Street in New York City, Abrams was described as "one of those rare figures in whom the historical scholar and the literary figure blend perfectly, to the point where it becomes impossible and needless to make any distinction."

Abrams is the Class of 1916 Professor Emeritus of English Literature. At age 77, he still rides a bike to campus from his Cayuga Heights home and works almost daily in his cramped office in Goldwin Smith Hall.

In addition to citing Abrams' classic work in literary history, "The Mirror and the Lamp," which was first published in 1954, and "Natural Supernaturalism," published in 1971, the institute lauded his contributions to literary theory, which are gathered together for the first time in "Doing Things with Texts," a collection of essays by Abrams on

criticism and critical theory published last fall by W.W. Norton & Co.

Philosopher Richard Eldridge, writing for the *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, said that Abrams' "Doing Things with Texts" is "the most important and successful book in English on aesthetic theory, particularly in relation to literature, since Coleridge."

Michael Fischer, the editor of the book, wrote in the foreword that, while Abrams appreciates and incorporates the contributions of often-conflicting literary theories such as deconstruction and the new criticism, he insists that literary criticism "cannot limit itself to formal or structural considerations."

Fischer states that Abrams' approach is a comprehensive view that conceives of "literature as a human product, addressed to human readers and dealing with matters of human concern." Fischer argues that this approach to a literary work has been a constant in Abrams' work for nearly five decades.

Fischer, a professor of English at the University of New Mexico, writes: "If contemporary literary theorists have any one aim, it is the desire to advance beyond new critical formalism by contesting the independence of the isolated literary work and questioning the disinterestedness of the supposedly objective reader."



Charles Harrington

M. H. Abrams

He suggests that Abrams “ought to be valued as a pioneer in this effort, even as a critic ahead of his time.”

In the concluding essay in the book, Abrams states that “the cardinal critical question is: ‘What’s in it for us readers now?’ ”

That question epitomizes a surprisingly pragmatic role Abrams sees for the humanist scholar. In his essay, “On Political Readings of Lyrical Ballads,” Abrams writes that “an open reader of ‘Tintern Abbey’ finds that it speaks now as it has spoken for almost two centuries, and will continue to speak in the future. Not because of transcendent and universal features (metaphysical essences of which I am no less wary than McGann), but for entirely empirical reasons. That is, the poem articulates and orders — although in time-and-place-specific ways that enhance its historical interest and invite imaginative participation beyond our parochial limits — modes of experience that we share with the poet, and that people will continue to share in any predictable future.”

Abrams goes on to say that, “should the political and social conditions prophesied by Marx come to pass, it is beyond peradventure that even in a classless society men and women will continue to live a mortal life in time; will suffer, as Wordsworth put it, ‘solitude, or fear, or pain, or grief’; will as a result surely become sadder, but may also, provided they are both strong and fortunate, become more comprehensively and sensitively human; and will find support in the awareness that they are not alone, but share their lot with those they love.”

He concludes that, “from such readers, ‘Tintern Abbey’ will continue to evoke a deep response because it speaks, in its innovative, ordered and compelling way, to enduring constants amid the ever-changing conditions of what it is to be human.”

Of Abrams’ own writing, literary critic Wayne Booth said in the 1983 special edition of *Contemporary Literary Criticism* devoted to “the most significant critics of the past 50 years” that “the proof of Abrams’ pudding is in the eating ... in the experience of Abrams in detail — including the detail of at least a major part of his extensive quotation from other authors... . And it is this experience that many sincere and competent readers will for various reasons not discover.”

In agreement with Booth’s final point, Abrams wrote in the same issue of *Contemporary Literary Criticism*: “A humanistic demonstration, unlike a scientific demonstration, is rarely such as to enforce the consent of all qualified observers. For it to carry the reader through its exposition to its conclusions requires some ground for imaginative consent, some comparative ordering of values, some readiness for emotional response to the matters shown forth, which the reader must share with the author even before he begins to read; and these common grounds are no doubt in part temperamental, hence variable from reader to reader.”

Alluding to a major criticism of his own work through the years, Abrams said, “If this assertion constitutes relativism, then we simply have to live with the relativism it asserts, for it is an aspect of the human predicament which the languages and complex strategies of proof in humanistic inquiries are designed to cope with, but can never entirely overcome.”

Martin B. Stiles

Panel seeks criteria for top teachers

Cornell Chronicle. 24(22)1&2. February 25, 1993.

By Sam Segal

Six professors emeriti are working on the criteria for nominating the first Stephen H. Weiss Presidential Fellows, three of whom are expected to be named this spring.

The fellows program, endowed by and named for the Board of Trustees chairman, was announced Oct. 30 by President Frank H.T. Rhodes as a means "to recognize and reward distinguished teaching."

Rhodes said that the fellows would be selected from among "the most effective, inspiring and distinguished teachers of undergraduate students," but he chose to not prescribe the means by which the nominating committee developed its list of nominees.

The committee Rhodes appointed is chaired by the secretary of the faculty, Mary Morrison, professor emeritus of nutrition. The other professors emeriti are: Meyer Abrams of English, Maurice Neufeld of industrial and labor relations, Isabel Peard of education, Edgar Raffensperger of entomology and Raymond Thorpe of chemical engineering.

Rhodes has also invited three students to join the committee, which, some time in April, will present a slate of six nominees to Rhodes for his decision.

In the meantime, the committee welcomes ideas from students or faculty on the criteria for nomination. (A call for nominees will come next month once the criteria are set down.)

So far, the committee is considering criteria stipulating that nominations may come from juniors, seniors or faculty members and that nominees must be tenured; that they must be outstanding as advisers and mentors as well as lecturers; and that their teaching must reflect innovation, use of a breadth of resources, adaptability to students' learning needs, and creation of scholarly materials for students.

"For me, the best teachers were informative, were organized and had a sense of humor," Morrison says, "and those who served as mentors were particularly important. But I know ideas differ. We welcome suggestions."

Suggestions for nomination criteria may be sent to Morrison at the Dean of the Faculty's office, 315 Day Hall.

Weiss Presidential Fellows will carry their titles as long as they stay at Cornell and may hold them concurrently with other named professorships. For the first five years, they will also receive a \$5,000 stipend.

Editor's Note: The Stephen H. Weiss Presidential Fellow title is the standard of excellence for recognizing undergraduate teaching at Cornell University and is described at:

http://theuniversityfaculty.cornell.edu/weiss/weiss_main.html

The current list of Stephen H. Weiss Presidential Fellows (presently covering the last sixteen years) is at:

http://theuniversityfaculty.cornell.edu/weiss/fellow_list.html

Humanistic critic M.H. Abrams assesses poststructuralism

Cornell Chronicle. 24(28)5. April 15, 1993.

By Carole Stone

Poststructural literary criticism has given us a number of useful and interesting instruments for investigating literary works, but these radically new ways of looking at language and literature are often imposed as doctrines rather than applied as hypotheses, literary critic M.H. Abrams said in a lecture last month titled "What is a Humanistic Literary Criticism?"

Abrams, the Class of 1916 Professor Emeritus of English, is a renowned literary critic and scholar, the author of *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* and a number of other scholarly writings, and he is editor of the *Norton Anthology of Literature*.

He gave the first Heinrich and Alice Schneider Memorial Lecture in the Department of German Studies on March 31, drawing an audience that nearly filled Hollis E. Cornell Auditorium.

In an hourlong talk, Abrams offered a critique of current critical theories — especially structuralism, deconstruction and other forms of poststructural criticism — from the standpoint of traditional, or humanistic, criticism. He discussed what he considers the positive achievements of the new theories as well as their shortcomings.

Humanistic, or traditional, criticism has, since antiquity, dealt with works of literature as being written "by a human being, for human beings and about human beings and matters of human concern," Abrams said. In the humanistic paradigm, or frame of reference, the uses and productions of language, including literature, are conceived as transactions between human beings who are "purposeful agents capable of initiative, intention, design and choice," Abrams said.

Theorists and literary critics, including Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault, Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man, shifted the paradigm of language and literature from that of a human interchange to that of an already constituted language, or else of discourse as-such, Abrams said.

With this paradigmatic shift, a work of art, now called a "text" — to remove it from its connection with a human producer and its traditionally crucial aspect of referring to a world, whether fictional or real — is reconceived as a play of "intratextual and intertextual significations," Abrams said.

An author or writer is reconceived to be a scriptor, or scribe, an effect or product of the language, not a producer and shaper of it, while a reader is conceived as an impersonal process of reading.

The poststructuralist ways of conceiving and reading texts can be interesting "adventures in vision," he said. As working hypotheses, or discovery procedures, they can provide insights into the internal structural relationships of literary works; or de-familiarize what we tend to take for granted; or call attention to the incessant play of binary oppositions and metaphors in texts; or force us to consider the historical conditions that give rise to the conceptual schemes that constitute our discourse, Abrams said.



Abrams

But when critics convert discovery procedures into ruling hypotheses and argue down from assumed linguistics premises to what our actual practice of language must necessarily be, poststructuralism becomes aberrant, Abrams said.

“A theoretical position that is profitable as an adventure in vision, or as a speculative instrument for discovery, suffers a hardening of the categories and becomes a Grand Theory,” Abrams said.

“In the extreme instances, the result is that the human world, in which people employ language and discourse in their diverse purposes, whether for good or ill, is displaced by a theory world, in which people are not agents but agencies, not users of language but used by language, not effectors but themselves only effects,” he said.

To a confirmed traditional reader, the theory-worlds of all-out, or extreme, poststructural critics are a blatant mismatch to the world in which we live, write and read works of literature, Abrams said.

And at their worst extreme, poststructural criticisms can seem not only abstract and remote but profoundly alien, “as outlandish as though written by extraterrestrial visitors who have somehow learned to use our vocabulary but without participating in the forms of life with which that vocabulary is integral,” he said.

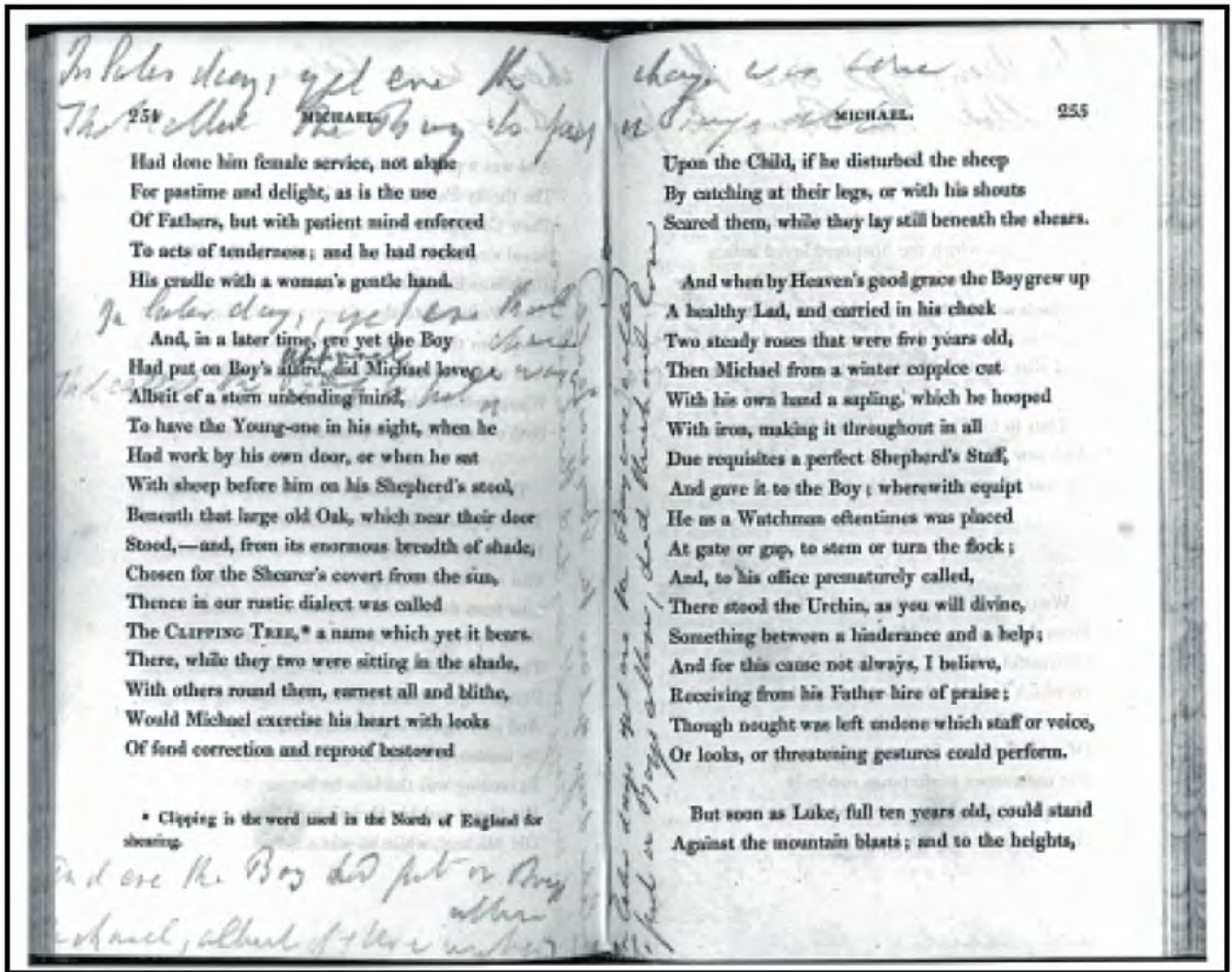
Finally, though, there is no “knock-down, drag-out” argument that can convince a deeply confirmed poststructuralist critic to view literature the way a humanistic critic does.

CU Library acquires rare Wordsworth volumes at auction in England

Cornell Chronicle. 30(35)1&2. May 20, 1999.

By Franklin Crawford

Cornell Library will announce the acquisition of a rare set of William Wordsworth's *Poetical Works* (1827), annotated with the poet's largely unpublished handwritten revisions, during a public reception in the Kroch Library's Rare and Manuscript Collections, Wednesday, May 26, at 4 p.m.



Cornell Rare and Manuscript Collections

Revisions to the poem "Michael," in Cornell's newly acquired edition of *Poetical Works*, are in the hand of the poet, William Wordsworth.

The library's Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections purchased the unique five-volume set last December at a Sotheby's auction in London. The acquisition, which cost approximately \$60,000, was made possible by an endowment established by M.H. Abrams, the Cornell Class of 1916 Professor of English Emeritus. The endowment supports purchases of research materials by and relating to William Wordsworth (1770-1850), one of England's and the world's most celebrated poets. Cornell's Wordsworth collection is second only to that in Dove Cottage, the Wordsworth museum and archive in England.

“When I was notified last fall that the set was to be auctioned at Sotheby’s, I knew it was one of the most important Wordsworth items to be offered for sale in several decades,” said Katherine Reagan, Cornell’s rare book librarian. “However, I was reluctant to commit to a bid without personally examining the books.”

‘The more I learned about the volumes, the more convinced I became that they belonged at Cornell.’

– Katherine Reagan, rare book librarian

As fate would have it, Cornell’s Stephen M. Parrish, the Goldwin Smith Professor of English Emeritus, a noted Wordsworth scholar and general editor of the *Cornell Wordsworth* – a complete edition of Wordsworth’s poetry, with all the variant readings – was

in London at the time and was able to confirm the value of the volumes. He emphasized that the books would be of particular importance to the editors of the *Cornell Wordsworth*, of which 18 volumes are in print and the final three, plus index, are in advanced stages of preparation.

The *Poetical Works* volumes were in the hands of a private collector who had not made the significant annotations available to Wordsworth scholars. Because the *Cornell Wordsworth* promises to provide all readings from all known printings and all known manuscripts made during the poet’s lifetime, access to the unpublished revisions in these books was essential to the completion of the edition’s editorial mission.

“The more I learned about the volumes, the more convinced I became that they belonged at Cornell,” said Reagan.

Despite competitive bidding from a private collector, Cornell Library prevailed at Sotheby’s auction Dec. 17, 1998. “We were elated, but we still had to obtain an export license,” Reagan said.

Because the books are covered by laws limiting the export of artifacts important to the preservation of Britain’s cultural heritage, there was no guarantee the books would be permitted to leave England. Speculative debate among members of the British press, however, did not prevent the British government from granting Cornell a license. Cornell Library, after all, will preserve the set for current and future generations of scholars, each of which will have the opportunity to interpret the meaning of William Wordsworth’s unpublished annotations.

Many authors use published copies of their works as starting places for further revision, inserting handwritten changes or additions into the margins or between the lines of the printed text. Such is the case with Cornell’s recent acquisition, as Wordsworth used this five-volume set, published in 1827, to sketch ideas for revising several of his poems, presumably for inclusion in subsequent editions. These annotated copies will offer valuable insight into the literary imagination of the poet and a record of the development of his work.

Professor emeritus M.H. Abrams' volume makes best nonfiction books list

Cornell Chronicle. 30(35)3. May 20, 1999.

By Linda Grace-Kobas

As humankind faces the end of the tumultuous 20th century, one manifestation of millennial fever is the flurry of "best of the century" – and even "best of the millennium" – lists put out by publishers and critics.

Each list, of course, provokes debate. One of the most carefully compiled of the recent lists is the Modern Library's 100 Best Nonfiction Books written in English during the 20th century, which has a fair amount of Cornell representation.

M.H. ("Mike") Abrams, who is the Class of 1916 Professor Emeritus in English, is included at No. **25** in the Modern Library list for his influential book of literary criticism, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, published in 1953. The book won the Phi Beta Kappa Christian Gauss Prize in 1954 and in 1957 was cited in a poll of 250 critics and professors of literature as one of five "works published within the last 30 years which ... have contributed most to an understanding of literature."

Other books on the Modern Library list written by people connected to Cornell are:

8) *Speak, Memory* by Vladimir Nabokov. One of the most famous writers of the 20th century for *Lolita* and other novels, Nabokov was a member of the Cornell faculty from 1948 to 1959. He completed this autobiography while he was at Cornell.

21) *The Elements of Style* by Strunk and White. William Strunk, a professor of English at Cornell, wrote his style-book in 1918. E.B. White, Class of 1921, who later wrote *Charlotte's Web*, among other notable books, was his student. White's supplementary chapter to Strunk's rules produced what is arguably the most influential book on the mechanics of writing in the English language.

26) *The Art of the Soluble* by Peter B. Medawar. A biologist who won the 1960 Nobel Prize in medicine, Medawar was an A.D. White Professor at Large from 1965 to 1971.

28) *A Theory of Justice* by John Rawls. Rawls served as a professor in the Department of Philosophy from 1953 to 1960.

29) *Art and Illusion* by Ernest H. Gombrich. This influential art historian was an A.D. White Professor at Large from 1970 to 1976.

88) *Six Easy Pieces* by Richard P. Feynman. The dynamic physicist was a Cornell faculty member from 1945 to 1950. He won the 1965 Nobel Prize in physics.

David McCullough, who was an Olin lecturer this semester and a visiting professor previously, is listed at No. 48 for *The Great Bridge*. And there is even a Cornell-Ithaca connection to *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* by Alex Haley and Malcolm X. Haley was born in Ithaca, and Malcolm debated James Farmer at Cornell in 1964. The judges who compiled the list were members of the editorial board of the Modern Library, a division of Random House. Judges included A.S. Byatt, Caleb Carr, Christopher Cerf, Shelby Foote, Stephen Jay Gould, Vartan Gregorian, Charles Johnson, Jon Krakauer, Edmund Morris, Elaine Pagels, John Richardson and Arthur M. Schlesinger.

Honored literary scholar M.H. Abrams continues his labors (of love)

Cornell Chronicle. 30(37)9. June 10, 1999.

By Linda Grace-Kobas

Anyone whose book has been selected as one of the best of the 20th century could be forgiven for putting on a few airs. After all, such an honor is a sign of permanence as well as excellence.



Robert Barker/University Photography

Professor Emeritus M.H. Abrams is author of the acclaimed *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* and editor of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature*, which he conceived.

Smith reminds us all that scholarship is a labor of love, not a 9-to-5 job," said Jonathan Culler, chair of the Department of English. "During the culture wars and arguments about the literary canon, he has promoted here at home an open-mindedness and mutual respect that has often been lacking elsewhere."

Abrams' legacy to Cornell is deep and abiding. He was a founder of the A.D. White Center for the Humanities, which brings scholars from around the world to campus. He has been a staunch supporter of the University Library, chairing membership drives and establishing an endowment that resulted in the recent acquisition of a unique set of volumes of William Wordsworth's *Poetical Works* (1827), with copious emendations by the poet which have been unknown to scholars before now.

Abrams' literary legacy is vast, as well. Among his accomplishments and honors are these:

- His best-of-the-century book *The Mirror and the Lamp*, a classic in literary theory, received the Phi Beta Kappa Christian Gauss Prize in 1954. "It was a groundbreaking book about changes in the conception of literature which came to fruition in the Romantic period," Culler said. "It's a work of intellectual history that took literary theory seriously and examined the crucial role of metaphorical models in the writing, reading and interpreting of literature."
- He conceived and edited *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* in 1962. The seventh edition of these massive two volumes will be released this fall.
- He's written six books, including *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, which won the James Russell Lowell Prize in 1972, and edited six others.

But having his acclaimed book of literary criticism, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, ranked as No. 25 in the Modern Library's list of the 100 best nonfiction books written in English during the past 100 years doesn't seem to have fazed M.H. (Mike) Abrams at all. He thoughtfully waits outside his new home to meet a reporter, lest she get lost in the rambles of Ithaca's Kendal community. And he's even developed a self-effacing sound bite for the honor: "Shucks, it's only a century. Now, if it had been a millennium!"

This response would not surprise Abrams' colleagues at Cornell. While the Class of 1916 Professor of English Literature Emeritus is among the most highly regarded literary scholars of our time, he is appreciated among Arts faculty here for being a modest and wise man, as well.

"[Mike's] constant presence in the halls of Goldwin

- His numerous honors include the Award in Humanistic Studies from the American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1984), the Distinguished Scholar Award by the Keats-Shelley Society (1987) and the Award for Literature by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1990).

Now 86 years old, Abrams isn't about to rest on his impressive laurels. He's spent much of the last two years revising the seventh editions of his *Norton Anthology* and his *Glossary of Literary Terms*. He's published an essay in a new book by the University of Massachusetts Press, *The Persistence of Poetry: Bicentennial Essays on Keats*. He's preparing to present the Harder Lecture, sponsored by the English department and Cornell Plantations, in the fall (tentatively titled, "This Green World," quoted from Wordsworth). And he wants to learn how to use a computer.

In a recent interview, Abrams displayed interests that range from the early Romantic poets to rap.

Whom does he read? "John Updike is always fun. And one of my former students, Tom Pynchon. I like to read [Cornell professor and poet] Archie Ammons, my great friend. And Harold Bloom, another former student."

Abrams was disappointed that several books he most highly regards were not on the Modern Library list.

The quotable Abrams

On deconstruction theory: "When something startlingly new comes up, people — young people, especially — seize it. You can't complain about that. I think its heyday has passed, but it's had an effect and will continue to have an effect."

On predicting trends in literary theory: "If you learn one thing from having lived through decades of changing views, it is that all predictions are necessarily false."

On literature: "We are human, and nothing is more interesting to us than humanity. The appeal of literature is that it is so thoroughly a human thing -- by, for and about human beings. If you lose that focus, you obviate the source of the power and permanence of literature."

On Robert Frost: "He always violated your expectations. ... He was a character."

On his student Harold Bloom: "Indisputably a genius and one of the great flamboyant characters of our era."

On Shakespeare: "It's amazing how, age after age, in country after country, and in all languages, Shakespeare emerges as incomparable."

On the movie "Shakespeare in Love": "Fun. Good Stoppard. But I didn't recognize Shakespeare. They made him out to be a kind of 19th century esthete."

On the "death of literature": "You always hear about it, but it's always grossly exaggerated. The survival of artistic modes in which we recognize ourselves, identify ourselves and place ourselves will survive as long as humanity survives."

"When I was a graduate student, the leading spirits at Harvard were interested in the history of ideas," he said. "Three books were almost student bibles: *Science and the Modern World* by Alfred North Whitehead, who taught at Harvard while I was a student there. [He is on the list at No. 23 for *Principia Mathematica* with Bertrand Russell.] The other two of the trilogy were E.A. Burt's *The Metaphysical Foundations of Modern Science*, which I think is a classic. He was a philosopher at Cornell who did splendid work. The other book is by the great Cornell historian Carl Becker, *The Heavenly City of the Eighteenth Century Philosophers*. Becker's paradoxical undertaking was to show that the theories of the major philosophers of the 18th century secular enlightenment were biblical and theological in spite of themselves. He opened up a way of thinking which, looking back, I find had a great influence on me."

Born in Long Branch, N.J., on July 23, 1912, Abrams graduated from public high school and went to Harvard, where he earned his A.B. (1934), A.M. (1937) and Ph.D. (1940) in 18th and 19th century literature, literary criticism and European Romanticism. He was a Henry Fellow at Cambridge University in 1934-35.

Despite his literary specialization, Abrams worked as a scientist in classified research during World War II.

"The Psycho-Acoustic Laboratory was a supposedly secret lab in the basement of Memorial Hall at Harvard," he said.

His wife of 62 years, Ruth Claire Gaynes, also was employed there as a civilian. "We worked on solving the problem of voice communications in a noisy military environment. We developed tests for communications

equipment, established military codes that are highly audible and invented selection tests for personnel who had a superior ability to recognize sound in a noisy background caused by engines and gunfire.”

What qualified him for that job? His interest in psychology and the phonetics and philology courses he took to satisfy the old-fashioned requirements for a doctorate in English literature, he said.

Right after the war, Abrams was offered a job at Cornell. He was “charmed” by his first sight of the campus and Ithaca. Ruth, he jokes, being from New York City, “thought Ithaca was the end of the world.” But, she learned to love it, too.

Moving from war science back to literature was “quite a shock.” Abrams had begun working on *The Mirror and the Lamp* in Cambridge in the mid-’30s and went back to it. “The book didn’t appear until 1953,” he said. “Most of it was rewritten half a dozen times. Hard work makes easy reading or, at least, easier reading.”

That book won instant acclaim.

“I’ve always been surprised at the degree of success of *The Mirror and the Lamp* and the range and duration of esteem for it,” Abrams commented. “I had no reason to expect in 1953 that it would appeal to more than a specialized group interested in literary criticism. I think one of the reasons why it’s been of interest to a broad spectrum of readers is because one of its emphases was on the role of metaphors in steering human thinking. It was a very early book to insist on the role of metaphors in cognition, as well as in imaginative literature -- to claim that key metaphors help determine what and how we perceive and how we think about our perceptions.”

Abrams confessed that, to his mind, his book *Natural Supernaturalism* is “more important” than his more acclaimed work. One of its chief emphases, he explained, is the profound influence of biblical and theological literature on secular thinking, literature and the writing of history. “*Natural Supernaturalism* is quite well known and even used as a textbook,” he said, “but it never seems to have attracted the acclaim of its predecessor.”

What accounts for its relative lack of esteem? “The title, *Natural Supernaturalism*, is harder to pronounce than *The Mirror and the Lamp*, which is a title quoted from William Butler Yeats,” he said, smiling. “People get the title wrong in all sorts of ways. It’s rare to find someone getting it right.”

Abrams also was surprised by the success of the *Norton Anthology*. He was approached by the president of W.W. Norton to edit a volume to be used in survey courses in literature, modeled on a course he taught at Cornell.

“We expected to sell some thousands of copies,” he said. “What happened was inconceivable. It took off and sold all over the world. We tried to represent the greatest of English literary works in two volumes. And over the years, the bigger it’s gotten, the better it’s sold.”

Abrams is working on a new project in an area he thinks has been largely neglected, which he calls “The Fourth Dimension of a Poem.” It’s the focus of his essay in *The Persistence of Poetry*, and it harks back to his wartime research in Harvard’s Psycho-Acoustic Lab.

The dimensions of poetry are the look of print on the page, the sound of the words, the meaning of the words and — the fourth — the physical act of articulating the words, he explained. In his essay, he writes, “... when we read a poem slowly and with close attention, even if we read it silently to ourselves, the act involves — often below the level of distinct awareness — the feel of enunciating the words of the poem by remembered, imagined, or incipient movements and tactile sensations in the organs of speech, that is, in the lungs, throat, mouth, tongue and lips.” This feature “is essential to the full experience of a poem,” he adds, and “has been neglected in literary criticism.

“If you lose that dimension of poetry, if you read quickly to get through a poem to what it means, you have missed the body of the poem,” he said. The fourth dimension is vibrantly displayed in the way Robert Pinsky articulates his poems or in the speeches of the great black orators like Martin Luther King Jr. and even in rap music, Abrams noted. “Rap is far from an abstract, dematerialized mode of utterance. I hate a lot of rap because it’s bad stuff, but it does emphasize the articulatory aspect of the words.”

Abrams describes reading Keats' poetry aloud as "a richly sensuous oral activity" which feels "like honey on the tongue." Amidst the noise of 21st century infotainment media, a Romantic poet like Keats may be as hard to hear as a man trying to shout words into a radio over the noise of tanks and bombs.

<http://www.news.cornell.edu/Chronicle/99/6.10.99/Abrams.html>

Birthday sleight of hand

Cornell Chronicle. 34(1)2. August 15, 2002.



Nicola Kountoupes/University Photography

Helping Cornell English Professor Emeritus M.H. Abrams, left, celebrate his 90th birthday July 23 in the Statler Hotel's Banfi's Restaurant are many of his friends and colleagues, including English department faculty members, from left, Professor Dan McCall and professors emeriti James McConkey, Stephen Parrish and Cushing Strout (who is performing magic tricks for the guest of honor).

http://www.news.cornell.edu/chronicle/02/8.15.02/photo-Abrams_party.html

Editor's Note: The following invited lecture was presented in Goldwin Smith Hall on June 9, 2005, in conjunction with the exhibit of Cornell's James Joyce Collection, "James Joyce: From Dublin to Ithaca," organized by the Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Hirshland Exhibition Gallery, Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University. See also the 2005 North American James Joyce Conference, "Return to Ithaca," held June 14-18, 2005. <http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/joyce/index.html> and <http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/joyce/events.html>



If using Acrobat Reader 9 or higher, click the controls at left to hear the lecture.

This lecture was presented again on August 16, 2005, for his neighbors at Kendal at Ithaca; a video recording of that presentation is contained on the DVD associated with this project.

An Unlikely Story: The Joyce Collection at Cornell

M. H. Abrams, Class of 1916 Professor Emeritus of English

Hollis E. Cornell Auditorium, Goldwin Smith Hall



Kevin Stearns/University Photography

Professor M. H. "Mike" Abrams lectures on "An Unlikely Story: The Joyce Collection at Cornell," June 9 in Goldwin Smith Hall.

June 9, 2005

Good afternoon, fellow admirers and supporters of the Cornell University Library. And thank you, Sarah Thomas, for your warm and generous introduction. Nearly two decades ago I lectured regularly in this room to a captive audience; looking around, I recognize a number of faces now that I saw then, and I'm delighted that you are here, this time, not perforce, but by preference.

The collection of manuscripts and letters by James Joyce at Cornell is unsurpassed in its size and range, and unequaled in its relevance to the early, formative stages of Joyce's literary career. How did it come to rest here in rural,

upstate New York at what Frances Perkins, while teaching at Cornell, described as “a centrally inaccessible location”? The story is not, I think, generally known. Its plot is one of chance, of coincidence, and of a confluence of improbable circumstances; and since I played a part, though a minor one, in its cast of characters, I can tell that story as a first-person narrative.

It all began almost exactly a half-century ago, on a pleasant afternoon in the autumn of 1956. I was sitting in my office on the main floor of Goldwin Smith Hall, trying to persuade myself that I should be doing something useful, when the telephone rang. The caller was Mario Einaudi, a professor in the Department of Government. Did I know anything about James Joyce? Well, I responded, I know that Joyce was an author who, in the words of his biographer, Richard Ellmann, “set both the English language and literature on its end”; and that he, together with Marcel Proust, was the most innovative and influential novelist of the century. Mario then said that an acquaintance from Trieste named Ottocaro Weiss, a lawyer with offices both in Italy and New York City, had gotten in touch with him. Weiss had been entrusted by Nelly Joyce, the widow of James Joyce’s younger brother Stanislaus, to find a buyer for some literary materials by James Joyce, which she had inherited from her husband. Einaudi had an inventory of the manuscripts. Would I care to see it? Indeed I would! He at once crossed the quad and put on my desk a pile of blue-lined yellow pages, inscribed with a list of items that made my eyes dazzle. The list included a schoolboy essay by Joyce, manuscripts of early poems and of stories that were included in Joyce’s *Dubliners*, written materials for his *Portrait of an Artist as a Young Man* and for segments of his great novel *Ulysses*; and perhaps most important, about 1000 early letters from and to Joyce, many of them intimate and revealing family exchanges, together with Joyce’s correspondence with such eminent fellow-authors as W. B. Yeats, Ezra Pound, and T. S. Eliot.

How much, I asked (a little breathlessly), did Weiss ask for the documents? He had given Mario to understand that they could be bought for \$30,000.

I need to digress. The first unlikely chance, in a series of accidents, is that the late Mario Einaudi should be at Cornell. He was a thoroughly cosmopolitan European, member of a well-to-do family in the Italian intellectual aristocracy, whose father Luigi, a distinguished economist, was elected as the first president of the Italian Republic after World War II. Mario was himself an eminent, thoroughly liberal scholar of political theory and history who, in abhorrence of Mussolini’s dictatorship, had left Italy in 1933 to teach at Harvard, then at Fordham, and in 1945, finally and happily, at Cornell.

As for the man with the engaging name of Ottocaro Weiss: In his youth as a student in Zurich, he had been a friend of James Joyce. And he knew also Stanislaus — James’s admiring, but critical, often disapproving, and long-suffering younger brother, who had been persuaded by James to leave Dublin and join him and Nora in Trieste. Since James was himself a restless wanderer, moving from Dublin to Pola to Rome to Trieste to Zurich to Paris — and also, sometimes by necessity and sometimes by choice, moving from domicile to domicile within each city — he fell into the habit of depositing his manuscripts for safekeeping with his stable younger brother; until, that is, their relations cooled, at about 1920. Many of these early writings were still at Stanislaus’ house in Trieste when James died in 1941. They had descended to Stanislaus’ widow Nelly, who happened to know and appeal to Ottocaro Weiss to find a buyer for them, who in turn happened to remember that Mario Einaudi, whom he happened to know, was at Cornell, and so sent to Mario the list that was now on my cluttered desktop, down the corridor here in Goldwin Smith Hall.

With that list in one hand and Mario Einaudi’s elbow in the other, I hurried to the office of the Director of the Cornell Library, Stephen McCarthy, situated in the old Tower Library, now the Uris Undergraduate Library. Steve at once recognized a golden opportunity, and while Einaudi and I were still there, telephoned the President of Cornell, Deane Malott. Now, both McCarthy and Malott happened to be the right men to play essential parts in acquiring the Joyce manuscripts; and I must digress again to explain why. And that explanation requires in turn a backward glance at the extraordinary history of the Cornell Library and its special collections.

It was Cornell’s immense good fortune to have as its co-founder and first president, Andrew D. White, a man who fervently believed — not at that time a general opinion — that one cannot have a great university without a great

research library; and in his usual mode of thinking grandly, White set out to establish, at newly-founded Cornell, the finest research library in the country. (He came remarkably close to realizing this impossible dream.) White was himself one of the leading — perhaps the leading collector of scholarly books in his era, and eventually presented to Cornell his almost unparalleled accumulations — gathered chiefly for his own broad-ranging scholarly researches — in such areas as Martin Luther and the Reformation, witchcraft and the Inquisition, the French Revolution and Napoleonic period, and the history of science. He also wisely appointed as the first Cornell librarian his friend Willard Fiske, who doubled as Professor of Northern European languages. Fiske inherited from his wife, Jennie McGraw, the money that enabled him to gather, and then leave to Cornell, his unmatched collections in Dante, Petrarch, and Icelandic literature. White also established the policy, and made it part of the library's ethos — or as we now say, “culture” — to purchase, whenever possible, ready-made collections of books gathered for their private research by individual scholars in Europe and America. (Astonishingly, for example, A. D. White arranged for Cornell to purchase the Charles Anthon collection in classical philology and literature, unequaled at that time in America, even before the University first opened its doors to students in 1868.) The result was that by the 1890s, when the first Library building — the Tower library — was finally constructed, Cornell's holdings were ranked fifth among all the universities in the country. Remember, Cornell was then less than 30 years old, while three of the four libraries ranked above Cornell — Harvard, Yale, Columbia — had been founded before or during the eighteenth century, and had been gathering books ever since.

But alas! although Cornell continued, after the death of Andrew White, to acquire many rich collections of books, mainly through the generosity of its alumni — who, as you know, tend to be loyal barely this side of fanaticism — the university's financial support for staffing, operation, and acquisitions in the new library was limited, and became increasingly inadequate. The Tower Library, the finest (as well as most beautiful) research structure in the country when built in 1891, and with what at first seemed ample space for future expansion, very quickly became overcrowded. (The Library suffered from its own success.) And in the period between the two World Wars, especially during the great depression after 1929, conditions at the library spiraled rapidly downward. To make room for new acquisitions, books were shuffled around, crowded into obscure corners, hidden in closets and shoved under staircases, until the interior — when I arrived in 1945 — was more like the setting of a story by Kafka than a major research library. An alumna, Rita Guerlac, in a splendid essay on the history of the Cornell Library, cites a librarian from another university who remarked, in an address to a library conference in 1946: “If you want to see how a great university has systematically killed its library, go look at Cornell.”

But all that changed, drastically and enduringly, with the appointment of Stephen McCarthy as head of the Cornell Library in that same postwar year, 1946. He was promised full support by the administration, reorganized the library system, made brilliant appointments in key positions, and instilled optimism in the depleted and dispirited library staff. And perhaps most important was the fact that, soon after McCarthy's arrival, Cornell in 1951 acquired as University president Deane W. Malott.

On the surface President Malott would seem an unlikely candidate for resuscitating the Cornell Library, when his predecessors who succeeded A. D. White had all failed to do so. For the earlier presidents had themselves been scholars, while Malott was primarily a man of business — he had a master's degree from the Harvard Business School, became a vice-president of the Hawaiian Pineapple Company, then returned to the Business School as an associate professor before being elected President, first of the University of Kansas, then of Cornell. But Deane Malott had many powerful qualities as an academic leader. He knew, as he himself said, that “a university is not a business. We are not efficient, and never will be.” He knew also when and how to rely on the expertise and sagacity of others. And he was decisive: he knew how to calculate odds, and had the audacity to take risks when circumstances called for and justified them. During his tenure, he transformed the physical campus of Cornell. And among his many academic initiatives, two stand out as eminently humanistic. He established for Cornell its first museum of fine arts, in the A. D. White building; the museum later moved to the wonderful, sculpturesque building designed by I. M. Pei and underwritten by Herbert F. Johnson. And he poured new funds into the library system; then, after almost fifty years of the increasing inadequacy of the original Tower Library, he got Cornell a new building, the John M. Olin Library.

The story was current that soon after his inauguration, President Malott sent his Provost, Horace Hill — known as “Frosty Hill” — to investigate the needs of the University Library. Frosty reported, dejectedly, that to reverse its decline, the library budget would need to be doubled. Malott replied, with no hesitation, “Then double it.”

Years later, after his retirement, I repeated this story to Deane Malott and asked him whether it was true. His reply was characteristically laconic: “Approximately.” At any rate, the record shows that the library budget for buying books increased sixfold in the first six years of Stephen McCarthy’s stewardship.



I doubt that we would have bought the Joyce collection, if we hadn’t known that we were about to get a library building adequate to house it. A prime factor in delaying the construction of a new building was the problem of its location. Everyone agreed it had to be central to the College of Arts and Sciences, yet almost everyone also agreed that it must not encroach on the grand Arts Quadrangle (originally laid out by Frederick Law Olmstead, designer of Central Park in New York City), nor replace or encapsulate the historic Tower Library, nor encroach on the vista afforded by the slope of the hill, from the Arts Campus down to Ithaca and Cayuga Lake. I happened to be a member of the faculty Library Committee when President Malott attended a historic meeting to ask us to confirm his judgment that, to ensure a central location for a new library, there was no good alternative to building it in place of Boardman Hall, standing at the south end of the Arts Quadrangle. Reluctantly, we yielded to the cogency of his argument and approved the demolition of Boardman Hall.

As some of you may be old enough to remember, when that decision was announced, all hell broke loose. Boardman, originally the site of the Law School, had been built by Henry W. Miller, a student at the opening of the Cornell College of Architecture, who became one of the earliest, and undeniably the greatest, architects of the Cornell Campus, whose structures included the Tower Library itself. And Boardman itself was undeniably handsome, with its Romanesque arches, spacious offices, and steeply gabled, red-tile roof. But as I can attest, for I gave a lecture-course there, the building was antiquated, inefficient, and a dangerous fire-trap.

The issue of replacing Boardman with a new library was bitterly fought out, not only at Cornell and in Ithaca, but in the national press. President Malott, however, proved his mettle, and stood staunch.

I remember vividly when, after all the verbal warfare, the day came, in the spring of 1959, to demolish Boardman Hall. The ultimate comment on the hullabaloo was made by students, in the form of a large cartoon that morning in the *Cornell Sun*. In the center a large rig has drawn up, with one of those terrifying iron wrecking balls suspended from a thick chain. On the left is the stone Romanesque structure of Boardman Hall; on the right, the brick Gothic of Sage Chapel; and at some distance in front, the nondescript modern of Day Hall, then the relatively new administration building. The driver of the rig is leaning out of his cab, obviously asking directions from an undergraduate. And the undergraduate is wordlessly pointing to — Day Hall!

But I must resume the story where I left off, which, as I hope you remember, was at the scene in which Mario Einaudi and I were sitting in McCarthy’s office, showing him the inventory of the Joyce manuscripts. Galvanized by what he saw and heard, McCarthy at once telephoned President Malott. Now, the President had on several occasions shown himself to be rather prim, when it came to sexual matters in student publications. But as I said, he knew how and when to rely on the expertise of others. He asked: “In your judgment, Stephen, is the purchase worthwhile?” McCarthy replied, “I think it’s the chance of a lifetime.” Malott’s response was typical: “Then buy it.” “But where will we get the money?” Malott: “You buy the collection; raising the money is my business as president.”

Not the least of Malott's virtues as president was that he knew which of Cornell's loyal alumni had not only the financial means, but also the special interest, and the generosity, to fund a particular project; he also knew how to reason — or cajole — them into doing so. In this instance Malott appealed to several possible donors, but especially to William G. Mennen, Class of 1908. With him, we come to the last of the notable characters in our narrative.

And again, on the face of it, William Mennen — who had prospered as a manufacturer, in Morristown, New Jersey, of shaving cream and other men's toiletries — seems an improbable person to buy for Cornell a collection of James Joyce, who by much of the reading public at the time was still thought of as the author of a work bordering on pornography, whose *Ulysses* had, not long before, been intercepted as obscene and burnt by U.S. Customs officials. But Mennen was in fact a man of broad literary interests, who collected rare books, and had already given the Cornell library two magnificent gifts — an almost priceless set of the first four folio editions of the works of William Shakespeare, and a collection of the first editions of Charles Dickens, including the serial installments in which many of Dickens' novels first appeared.

I shall digress one last time to narrate the delightful story Stephen McCarthy told me about his first meeting with William Mennen. One afternoon Steve was in that same office in the Tower Library, and answered a knock on the door. There stood a rather small man carrying a rather large parcel, wrapped in brown paper and tied with coarse twine. The visitor — Steve didn't clearly catch the name — told him that he had brought some old books the library might have use for. Steve thanked him politely; he put the parcel down, and departed. Since Steve assumed this was a worthless offering — a kind known to all university Librarians — of third-rate books discarded by the owner, he didn't get around to opening the parcel until the time to leave for home. He cut the twine, unfolded the brown paper — and all but fainted. There on his desk were all four of the first Shakespeare folios.

How did Mennen come to collect such excessively rare books? I can only repeat to you the account told by Mennen himself, at a dinner given by President Malott in the spring of 1957, to celebrate the physical arrival at the Cornell Library of the Joyce collection. I suspect, however, that Mennen's narrative tells us much more about his wry, self-deprecating humor than about the facts of the matter.

"When I went to a friend's for dinner," he told us, "he would ask, after the meal, 'Would you care to step into the next room to see my old paintings?' Or else, 'Why don't we stroll into the garage, so I can show you my collection of old automobiles?' So I asked my lawyer, 'Is there something I can collect to show my friends that doesn't take up a lot of room, as do old automobiles or old paintings?' He suggested that I might collect old books, which wouldn't require anything more than a couple of book-cases to keep them in.

"I thought that was a pretty good idea, so I started buying old books. After a while, my lawyer said, 'Say, these books are pretty valuable; you need to insure them.' But the insurance agent told me they couldn't insure books on open shelves, I'd have to build a burglar-proof vault in the cellar to store them in. But, I thought, how can I say to my friends, after dinner, 'Why don't we stroll down to the cellar, so I can open the vault and show you my old books?' So I reflected a while, and decided, 'The heck with it; I'll just give my old books to the Cornell Library.'"

But back again to our story. I'll relieve your suspense by revealing that William Mennen did provide President Malott with the \$30,000 for buying the Joyce manuscripts. For an additional \$6,000, acquired from two other alumni, Victor Emanuel and C. Waller Barrett, Cornell also bought from Nelly Joyce what she had reserved from the first batch of manuscripts, the extraordinary exchange of highly-charged love-letters between James and Nora Barnacle, with whom he had eloped to Europe. William Mennen later added \$7,000 to buy other important writings that Nelly Joyce had turned up, stashed away in a trunk in her attic. And finally, Cornell was able to complement its manuscript holdings by searching for and finding a ready-made collection of the initial publications, in periodicals and books, of all of Joyce's works. And one last coincidence: It turned out that the collector of these publications, James Spoorri, a Chicago lawyer, was a Cornell alumnus — a graduate of the Cornell Law School. He agreed to sell his collection to Cornell, in 1961, for only \$2250. And who do you suppose provided the money? — That's right: William G. Mennen.

I have been specific about dollar costs for a reason. The initial purchase of Joyce materials by Mennen cost \$30,000; the additional letters and manuscripts bought from Nelly Joyce came to a total of \$13,000. The question must have occurred to many of you: These seem small sums; why all the fuss and difficulty about raising the money for buying the collection? A partial answer, of course, is that the value of the dollar fifty years ago was very much higher than it is now — the distinguished Cornell economist Alfred Kahn tells me that it was approximately seven times higher — so that Mennen's initial \$30,000 was equivalent to, say, \$210,000 today. Much more important, however, was that, in the 1950s, twentieth-century literary writings were not yet avidly sought after, and so bid up to phenomenal heights, by a multitude of collectors; while James Joyce was far from having achieved, for the common reader, his present reputation as a towering figure in English letters, one of the greatest of world novelists. In 1924, for example, the American lawyer and collector John Quinn, who had bought the complete manuscript of *Ulysses* from Joyce, put it up for auction, and it fetched only \$1,975. As for the materials offered to Cornell by Ottocaro Weiss: For one thing, Dick Ellmann told me that, while preparing his classic biography of James Joyce he had, to his jubilant surprise, discovered the existence of the cache of manuscripts in Trieste; he had then urged Northwestern University, at which he taught, to offer to buy it, to no avail. In addition, Katherine Reagan, Curator of Rare Books at Cornell, has recently discovered in the archives a letter indicating that Ottocaro Weiss had earlier offered the manuscript collection to the University of Kansas, which in response proposed buying only the letters, for \$10,000; or else the complete collection, for \$20,000. (Another coincidence, by the way: the lawyer acting for Kansas in that failed transaction had been James Spoorri!) Weiss, dissatisfied, had only then turned to Einaudi at Cornell. The literary market for 20th-century literature, has changed drastically since that time; while Joyce's manuscripts and correspondence are more highly prized, and so fetch higher prices, than those of any other author of the twentieth century.

Now, I happen to be interested in how much things cost. If any of you share that interest, the question no doubt occurred to you, as it did to me: Are there indications of what the collection of Joyce papers might fetch, if it were discovered and put on the market today? As a scholar, I decided to do research on that problem. My research consisted in putting the question to Katherine Reagan, Curator of Rare Books; and she, being omniscient on such matters, was ready with an answer. In an auction at Christie's in the year 2000, the notebook in which Joyce drafted the segment of *Ulysses* called "Circe" fetched \$1,400,000. The Cornell collection has, in the form of notebooks and loose sheets, two such items, one the manuscript of the segment of *Ulysses* called "Nausicaa," the other for the segment called "Oxen in the Sun."

Even more startling is the amount paid for a single letter from Joyce to Nora. Five years after eloping with Nora Barnacle, Joyce, then in his latter twenties, found it necessary to go for an extended stay in Dublin, leaving Nora and his two children in Trieste. Among the letters he wrote to Nora at that time are a number which express an extraordinary gamut of moods, mingling expressions of a deep and tender — indeed, religiously reverent — love, with wild passages of erotic memories, desires, and fantasies, of a frankness, an anatomical particularity, and a blunt idiom beyond anything, even, in the once-notorious passages in the once-banned novel, *Ulysses*. Last year (2004), one stray letter from this group was auctioned at Sotheby's; it sold for \$445,000. The Cornell collection has some dozens of letters from Joyce's fervently erotic exchange with Nora. To calculate what they, and the many hundreds of other letters written by Joyce, together with the mass of his literary manuscripts, would sell for, if discovered and put up for auction in 2005, requires an exercise in the higher mathematics.

Well, that concludes the story of the unlikely concomitance of people and events that made it possible for the Cornell Library to put together the exhibition of Joyce's manuscripts, letters, and memorabilia deep in the bowels of the remarkable underground library, that was built to house special collections and rare books, and funded by Carl A. Kroch. The exhibition will be available until October 28, 2005. It is designed to memorialize acquisition of the collection I have described, but above all, to celebrate that bizarre, often infuriating, but irresistibly engaging genius, James Augustine Aloysius Joyce.

How Cornell got its Joyce collection: Abrams relates an ‘unlikely’ story

**Linda Grace-Kobas,
Senior Director, Humanities and Social Sciences Communication**

June 13, 2005



Kevin Stearns/University Photography

M.H. Abrams lectures on “An Unlikely Story: The Joyce Collection at Cornell,” June 9 at the opening of the “From Dublin to Ithaca: Cornell’s James Joyce Collection” at the Hirshland Gallery in the Carl A. Kroch Library. The exhibit runs through Oct. 12, 2005.

ITHACA, N.Y. -- James Joyce was a “bizarre, often infuriating, but irresistibly engaging genius” who today is one of the most highly regarded 20th-century writers in English, Professor M.H. “Mike” Abrams told a gathering of alumni and friends who attended his June 9 lecture opening the Cornell University Library exhibition “From Dublin to Ithaca: Cornell’s James Joyce Collection.”

Abrams, speaking in a crowded Hollis E. Cornell Auditorium in Goldwin Smith Hall on a hot, sunny afternoon during Reunion Weekend, recounted the improbable series of events that led to Cornell’s acquisition in 1956 of a collection of the author’s letters and papers that, as Abrams put it, “has no equal.” The online version of the exhibition is at <http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/joyce/introduction/>.

The major Cornell players in the acquisition were Mario Einaudi, then a professor of government at Cornell; Stephen McCarthy, the university librarian; and President Deane W. Malott. Einaudi was contacted by a European friend who was representing the widow of Joyce’s brother, Stanislaus, who had been keeping a large number of the writer’s papers and letters and was anxious to sell them for \$30,000, Abrams related. This was at a time when Joyce’s writing was still considered controversial and his literary greatness had not yet been firmly established.

Einaudi took his friend’s letter, which included a listing of the documents offered for sale, to McCarthy, who felt it was the “chance of a lifetime” to acquire the collection. Malott unhesitatingly agreed to the sale and set himself the task of raising the money.

Abrams digressed in his talk to describe William Gerhard Mennen, Class of 1908, the university benefactor whom Malott approached for the \$30,000. Mennen had inherited a family company that made baby powder. He transformed it into a pioneering developer of men’s toiletries. With his fortune made, he began to collect rare books and later donated many valuable volumes to Cornell Library, including rare Shakespeare folios, which he had personally, and without announcement, delivered to the library wrapped in a parcel.

While \$30,000 seems an almost trifling sum today, Abrams reminded the audience that in 1956 it was a more substantial amount of spending power -- equal to about \$210,000 in today’s dollars, according to professor emeritus

of economics Fred Kahn, he said. And the acquisition of the Joyce papers was a bold investment decision in the 1950s, when works by 20th century authors were not sought by collectors. Today, with Joyce's tortured brilliance exalted, the Joyce collection is worth many millions of dollars.



Kevin Stearns/University Photography

Abrams receives a portrait of James Joyce from University Librarian Sarah Thomas.

American Academy of Arts and Sciences (1984), the Distinguished Scholar Award by the Keats-Shelley Society (1987) and the Award for Literature by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters (1990).

Following the lecture, Sarah Thomas, the Carl A. Kroch University Librarian, presented Abrams, who is the Class of 1916 Professor Emeritus in English, with a framed picture of Joyce in appreciation for his many contributions to the University Library. He has chaired membership drives and established an endowment that resulted in the acquisition of a unique set of volumes of William Wordsworth's "Poetical Works" (1827), with copious emendations by the poet.

Abrams' influential book of literary criticism, "The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition," published in 1953, is included at No. 25 in the Modern Library's list of the 100 best nonfiction books written in English during the past 100 years.

Abrams' literary legacy is impressive. In 1962 he conceived and edited "The Norton Anthology of English Literature," now in its seventh edition. He has written six books, including "Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature," which won the James Russell Lowell Prize in 1972, and he has edited six others. His numerous honors include the Award in Humanistic Studies from the

Photos from the 2005 North American James Joyce Conference, “Return to Ithaca,” June 14-18, 2005

(from RMC website: <http://rmc.library.cornell.edu/joyce/conference/index.html>)



Keeper of the Canon

By RACHEL DONADIO

Published by *The New York Times*, January 8, 2006.



M. H. Abrams, in an undated family photograph.

“Since it first appeared in 1962, ‘The Norton Anthology of English Literature’ has remained the sine qua non of college textbooks, setting the agenda for the study of English literature in this country and beyond. Its editor, therefore, holds one of the most powerful posts in the world of letters, and is symbolically seen as arbiter of the canon.” *Rachel Donadio is a writer and editor at the Book Review.* GO TO THE ONLINE VERSION: http://www.nytimes.com/2006/01/08/books/review/08donadio.html?_r=1&scp=1&sq=Keeper

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Literary critic Sandra Gilbert to be first M.H. Abrams Distinguished Visiting Professor

Cornell Chronicle. 38(12)2. October 27, 2006.



Abrams

The Cornell Department of English has established the M.H. Abrams Distinguished Visiting Professorship in honor of the renowned Cornell professor emeritus of English. Sandra M. Gilbert '57, a prominent literary critic at the University of California- Davis, has accepted the inaugural visiting professorship for the spring 2007 semester.

The professorship was made possible through a gift from Stephen H. Weiss '57, former chair of the Cornell Board of Trustees. Weiss made the gift in honor of his longtime friend, M.H. (Mike) Abrams, a highly respected literary scholar who is best known for his analysis of the Romantic period in English literature. Abrams' works include "The Mirror and the Lamp: Ro-

mantic Theory and the Critical Tradition," and he served as editor of the Norton Anthology of English Literature for more than 40 years. The New York Times has called the anthology "the sine qua non of college textbooks, setting the agenda for the study of English literature in this country and beyond."

The visiting professorship will celebrate Abrams' contributions to Cornell, whose faculty he joined in 1945, and the field of English by enabling the department to bring distinguished visitors to teach and interact with students and faculty. Gilbert, who studied with Abrams as a Cornell undergraduate, will be a featured speaker at a conference honoring Abrams and inaugurating the distinguished visiting professorship in his name in early 2007.

"We are thrilled that Professor Gilbert has accepted the appointment," said Molly Hite, chair of the English department at Cornell. "She is the perfect choice to inaugurate the visiting professorship and will certainly enhance the department and the experiences of students and faculty during her time here."

During Gilbert's appointment, she will teach an upper-division undergraduate and a graduate seminar, both on topics related to gender studies.

"I'm truly honored to accept your wonderful offer. It's so extraordinarily flattering to be asked to occupy the Abrams Visiting Professorship – a position named for my all-time-favorite teacher, sometimes I think my only teacher – that I hardly know how to formulate my gratitude," said Gilbert.

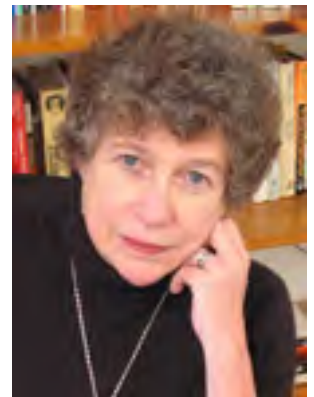
Gilbert's groundbreaking 1979 work, coauthored with Susan Gubar, "The Madwoman in the Attic: The Woman Writer and the Nineteenth-Century Literary Imagination," framed many terms of the debates in gender studies that have continued into the 21st century. Gilbert and Gubar subsequently co-edited "The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women" and a new anthology about to be published, "The Norton Reader in Feminist Criticism and Theory."

Note: The following was in the press release, but did not appear in the Chronicle article:

They also wrote the three-volume study "No Man's Land: The Place of the Woman Writer in the Twentieth Century" (Yale UP, 1988-94).

Gilbert also has written extensively about modernist writers, especially D.H. Lawrence, Kate Chopin and W.B. Yeats, and most recently about the elegy. She is the author of several books of poetry, as well. Among her many honors, she received Rockefeller, Guggenheim and NEH fellowships, was declared a Ms. Magazine "Woman of the Year" and served as president of the Modern Language Association.

<http://www.pressoffice.cornell.edu/releases/release.cfm?r=15747&y=2006&m=10>



Gilbert



The Big One

NORTON ANTHOLOGY FOUNDER M. H. ABRAMS HANDS HIS
LITERARY LANDMARK OVER TO THE NEXT GENERATION



Stephanie Green

Heavy reading: English professor emeritus Mike Abrams has edited seven editions of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* since 1962. For the 6,000-page eighth edition, he took a back seat to the new general editor, Harvard's Stephen Greenblatt.

Cornell Alumni Magazine
JULY / AUGUST 2006
109(1)20-22

A single volume weighs about four-and-a-half pounds, but it feels much heavier in your backpack as you head up Libe Slope to class. For many English majors, the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* represents the best physical—and mental—workout they'll get during their undergraduate years. Since 1962, the anthology has been the standard text in English survey courses, covering British literature from the Middle Ages to the twentieth century in two thick volumes. While the selection of contributors has evolved over time, certain names are constants: Chaucer, Shakespeare, Keats. And Abrams.

M. H. (“Mike”) Abrams, Class of 1916 Professor of English emeritus, has served as the anthology’s general editor from the first edition through the seventh. But for the new eighth edition, the ninety-three-year-old Abrams passed the torch—and the responsibility of squeezing English literary history into just over 6,000 pages—to Harvard professor and Shakespeare scholar Stephen Greenblatt. When Abrams first accepted the position, he never expected it to turn into the job of a lifetime. “I thought that we’d get the anthology done in about a year, and the thing would have fair sales for about a decade or so,” says Abrams, who continues to advise as editor emeritus. “Instead of a year, it took four years, and instead of lasting a decade, it seems to have become eternal.”

More than eight million copies of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* have been printed over the last forty-four years, a remarkable run for a book that began as a deeply unfashionable enterprise. In the mid-1950s, when the W. W. Norton Company asked Abrams to edit the first anthology, the field of literary studies was dominated by New Criticism, a movement that urged readers to disregard historical and cultural background and focus solely on close reading of individual texts. As a graduate student at Cambridge before World War II, Abrams had studied with the movement’s founder, I. A. Richards, but he was unconvinced. When he landed a position at Cornell after the war, Abrams designed a survey class that placed English literary works and authors back in context. “I was certainly swimming against the current,” he says. “It was the revival of an older mode of teaching literature.”

But that was exactly what Norton wanted. Earlier anthologies were typically put together by one or two editors. Abrams asked six other scholars to join him, dividing up the work by literary period so that each would select texts and write introductions for his own area of expertise. (Abrams assigned himself the Romantic period, the subject of his classic study *The Mirror and the Lamp*.) And he told his co-editors to take seriously the task of writing for undergraduates and those who teach them.

The formula clicked. “It was perfectly clear from the minute that the anthology became available that it would be greeted enthusiastically by teachers of English literature,” Abrams recalls. He received a flood of compliments from teachers and students—along with suggested changes. Abrams surveyed instructors on texts to add or drop for succeeding editions. Over the years, the anthology grew, and women writers and authors from beyond the British Isles, such as Chinua Achebe and Salman Rushdie, now share space with Milton and Dickens.

“There’s a leading and a following that goes on with this book,” says Julia Reidhead, vice president of W. W. Norton and only the second editor at the company to work with Abrams during the anthology’s history. “We follow in the sense that we listen closely to what teachers want to teach. There’s a leading in the sense that we have an editorial group of scholars who are in touch with the latest movements in their fields and are able to bring that excitement to the work.”

The first edition had fewer than 2,000 pages per volume, printed on the same ultra-thin stock used for Bibles. (“It’s not cigarette paper,” Abrams says, but he concedes that a few desperate English majors may have used it as such.) When the page count reached 3,000, “we hit the limits of physics,” Abrams says. “The books would just fall apart if we tried to make them any longer.” Today the anthology can be purchased in six volumes, split according to literary period, but the two-volume set remains more popular.

While the *Norton Anthology* can inspire passionate devotion, it’s not without its critics. Some accuse the editors of responding too quickly to shifts in literary and political sensibilities, while others say they haven’t changed fast enough. The notion of the canon—a set of texts that represent the eternal greatness of English literature—has inspired much debate of late: interest in works by women and people of color has grown and many English departments now teach courses on film, advertising, and other subjects that stretch traditional definitions of “literature.”

At Cornell, the year-long course that originally inspired the anthology, the English Literary Tradition, is no longer mandatory for English majors. “The field of English is now so broad and encompasses so many aspects of culture that it’s hard to know what should be required, if anything,” says associate professor Debra Fried, who now teaches the class. “I am no longer surprised at what even senior English majors have never heard of.”

Students who do enroll in the English Literary Tradition “expect to get a survey of ‘the canon’ or ‘great works’ or ‘classics,’” says Fried. She’s never had a student complain that the anthology is too traditional or doesn’t include enough writers out of the mainstream. “And I don’t think that those charges would be true anyway.”

To Abrams, the debate has always been secondary to the *Norton Anthology*’s pedagogical goal. “We had no notion at all of establishing a canon,” he says. “It’s clear that as the years have passed and millions of students have used the thing, it has come to represent the best that has been thought and said in English literature—the so-called canon—but our vision has always been a teachable course.”

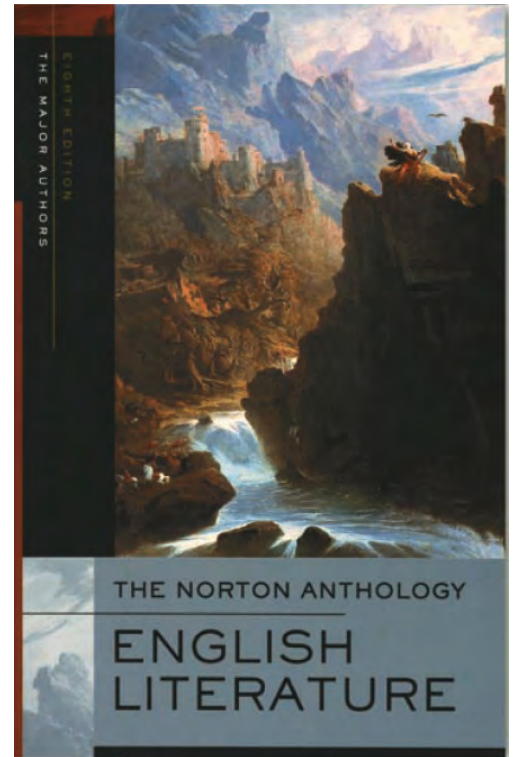
He loves to hear about the unorthodox ways teachers use the collection in their classrooms. Fried, for example, has enlisted her students to write introductory essays to the pieces in the anthology, tailored to their own experiences of confusion and revelation while reading the texts. The essays are posted on the course website for the benefit of future English 201 and 202 students. It’s that kind of creativity that the *Norton Anthology* was meant to inspire.

“One of Mike’s many virtues is that he has always had a clear eye about what would go on in the classroom,” says Stephen Greenblatt, who joined the *Norton Anthology* project as associate general editor for the seventh edition. When he met Abrams in the 1980s, he says, their first exchanges consisted of “genial sparring.” The two scholars represented different generations, different perspectives. Greenblatt, whose Shakespeare study *Will in the World* was a popular bestseller, has a more historical approach; Abrams tends to be more interested in literary form. The latest edition of the anthology reflects this shift with the inclusion of historical documents such as letters from Queen Elizabeth I and artwork from the relevant time periods. Greenblatt has also overseen an expansion of the anthology’s online presence. Works cut from the eighth edition were added to a Norton website ([http:// wwnorton.com/nael/](http://wwnorton.com/nael/)), where they can be downloaded by teachers and students along with other supplemental materials.

What won’t change, says Greenblatt, is the anthology’s commitment to its primary audience. “Mike established the principle that it’s not about impressing your three cleverest friends—it’s about thinking hard about what students need.”

Abrams believes that the anthology “is as good for the teacher as for the students,” he says. “It has enriched my sense of English literature immeasurably and kept me from being insulated in a single specialty. Nothing brings you as closely into touch with the minds of people who have lived before you, in cultures similar to but also very different from your own, as a broad knowledge of what has been thought and written in the English language.”

Greenblatt hopes that the anthology will have the same sustaining effect on him that it has had on his predecessor. “It seems to be an elixir,” he says. “I think that everyone should take the *Norton Anthology* to bed with them to stay young.”



— C. A. Carlson '93, MFA '96

Honorary Football Co-Captain for Harvard Game



Co-captain: At a party celebrating his 95th birthday, M. H. “Mike” Abrams, the Class of 1916 Professor of English emeritus, was presented with a football jersey by head coach Jim Knowles ’87 and named honorary co-captain for the Big Red’s Ivy League home opener against Harvard on October 6. Abrams—who has attended every home football game since coming to Cornell in 1945—will join the other co-captains on the field for the coin toss.

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A Life in Criticism: An Interview with M. H. Abrams

Jeffrey J. Williams.¹ *the minnesota review*. n.s. 69 (2007) 71-93.

M. H. Abrams is an iconic name in literary studies, appearing on the spines of over eight million copies of the *Norton Anthology of English Literature* and as the first entry in the references of two generations of critical books. His career has spanned, as he remarks in an essay on “The Transformation of English Studies: 1935-1995” (in *American Academic Culture in Transformation: Fifty Years, Four Disciplines*, ed. Thomas Bender and Carl E. Schorske [Princeton UP, 1997]), over half the life of the discipline of English, and he has been a major participant in its development.

His book, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford UP, 1953), was long a critical standard reevaluating Romanticism as well as making sense of the varieties of criticism in its first chapter, “Orientation of Critical Theories.” (Its diagram of the four focuses of criticism, with Work at the hub and Universe, Author, and Audience at the spokes, has probably been traced on thousands of classroom blackboards.) *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (Norton, 1971) traced the religious residue in post-Enlightenment, Romantic literature and philosophy. *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays on English Romanticism* (Norton, 1984) collects many of his influential essays on literature, and *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory*, ed. Michael Fischer (Norton, 1991), collects his many essays on critical theory, from “Orientation” to a series of responses to deconstruction.

While setting the terms for criticism of Romanticism for a generation, Abrams has had a great deal of influence in the undergraduate classroom, with his *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1957; 9th ed. 2008), and of course *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (1962; 8th ed. 2005). His was the first of the Bible-thick anthologies for which Norton became famous, but he tells here how it arose from a survey course and a chance meeting with a visiting editor.

Among his other work, Abrams’ first book, from his undergraduate thesis at Harvard, was *The Milk of Paradise: The Effect of Opium Visions on the Works of De Quincey, Crabbe, Francis Thompson, and Coleridge* (1934; Octagon, 1971). Abrams edited a number of volumes, including *Literature and Belief: English Institute Essays* (Columbia UP, 1958), *English Romantic Poets: Modern Essay in Criticism* (Oxford UP, 1960), and volumes of Pope’s poetry, Wordsworth’s *Prelude*, and essays on Wordsworth. *High Romantic Argument: Essays for M. H. Abrams*, edited by Lawrence Lipking (Cornell UP, 1981), includes responses as well as a bibliography of Abrams’ writing.

M. H. Abrams was born in 1912 in New Jersey. He attended Harvard University (BA, 1934), Cambridge University in England on a fellowship (1934-35), and Harvard again for his graduate work (MA, 1937; PhD, 1940). During World War II he worked in a lab at Harvard on problems of oral communication in military battle. He got his first—and only—job as a professor at Cornell in 1945, where he is Class of 1916 Professor of English Emeritus and still regularly visits his office in Goldwin Smith Hall.

This interview took place on 26 August 2007 at M. H. Abrams’ home in Ithaca, NY. It was conducted by Jeffrey J. Williams, editor of *the minnesota review*, and transcribed by David Cerniglia, assistant to the review while a PhD student in the literary and cultural studies program at Carnegie Mellon University.

Williams You’ve seen a lot of change in literary studies. You’ve seen it go from literary history, when you were at Harvard in 1930 or thereabouts, to New Criticism, and then to Northrop Frye’s archetypal criticism, to deconstruction, and finally to New Historicism. Maybe you could talk about the course of criticism that you’ve seen.

Abrams I was brought up in the days when to get a PhD you had to study Anglo-Saxon, Old Norse, Old French, and linguistics, on the notion that they served as a kind of hardcore scientific basis for literary study. But the fact

¹ Jeffrey J. Williams is a professor of English and literary and cultural studies at Carnegie Mellon University and editor of *the minnesota review*. He is an editor of *The Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* (2001), of which he and his colleagues are preparing a second edition.

is that good teachers taught literature too. Very clearly the bias of the teaching, even by the most lively teachers, was historical. They dealt with the changes in literary forms, with the history of the novel, and there was very little attention to the analysis of the literary text itself. We owe to the New Critics the ability to do what they called close reading—a close, extensive analysis of the construction of a poem and its metaphoric structure. That was new when I was an undergraduate, and it was distrusted, as new things always are, by the traditionalists.

I remember that I was one of the young bucks at Harvard who, as a graduate student, tried to get a New Critical kind of question into the general examination in English studies for English majors. At the end of your senior year you took a written exam, if you were aiming for honors at any rate, and the questions in those exams had a historical bias for the most part. Even when you were asked to discuss a particular poem they didn't expect you to open it out in the way the New Critics opened it out by close reading. So two of us graduate students got together and we proposed that one of the questions confront a student with a poem, unidentified either in time or place or authorship, to see what he would manage to say about it.

Williams Like I. A. Richards in *Practical Criticism*?

Abrams I spent a year at Cambridge on a fellowship studying with Richards—and yes, our proposed question was modeled on *Practical Criticism* or on the sort of thing that Cleanth Brooks and Warren in *Understanding Poetry* were doing. The whole notion was pooh-poohed by the older people who were writing the exams, who said students wouldn't be able to cope with the question. So we organized an experiment, I. A. Richards-style: we got together a dozen English majors, seniors, we dug out a poem, they were confronted with it and were asked to say what they could about it, and the results were very good. And we showed it to Douglas Bush and others who were the old timers in the department. Bush was one of the best of the old line teachers. He wrote a wonderful book about the use of mythology by the English poets. He was persuaded that maybe we ought to try it and, as I recall, the examiners did put in such questions.

But then after that I began to have qualms about the shortcomings of the New Criticism—not with their method of reading poems in detail, but with their antipathy, or at least careful avoidance, of historical contextual matters as relevant to the understanding of a poem, and even more with their theoretical shortcomings. Their analysis of poetry was basically on the verbal level, and focused on such matters as the use of metaphor, instead of taking a literary work as a human product, often presenting human beings in interaction with each other or speaking their minds and so on. It was the lack of humanity in their criticism that seemed to me an important shortcoming.

But looking back now at the swing against the New Critics, after almost every new kind of theorist attacked the New Critics—remember de Man's clever statement that “close reading is never close enough”—I have become a defender of those things. I want to say that without the New Criticism none of us would have very much to say about a poem. To be confronted with the verbal particulars of a poem and to deal with them is something the New Critics taught us to do.

Before the New Critics, close reading was, as far as I know, not exemplified by anyone. Take even a great critic like Coleridge. He analyzes the difference between fancy and imagination by analyzing two kinds of similes and metaphors which he compares to each other, and that's illuminating because he takes a short passage and opens it up; but he never deals with the poem as a whole in that way. You get something like De Quincey's treatment of the knocking of the gate in *Macbeth*. He takes a short passage in *Macbeth* and opens it out to show the power of Shakespeare's representations there of so-called comic relief. But De Quincey deals in that way only with a short passage in the play. There's no analysis of that nature applied to the whole of *Macbeth* until the New Critics.

Williams I can see how you combine both poles of the formation you mentioned—you are both an advocate of the close reading of poetry, especially, and also very much a literary historian. You were trained in literary history at Harvard; where did the close reading come from?

Abrams The exciting critical theorist at the time was I. A. Richards who, to a considerable extent, was behind the New Criticism. Between Richards and Richards' student, William Empson, a great deal of the New Criticism was

established—ambiguity, multiple meanings of a poetic passage, and the close analysis that Richards established in his practical criticism. Between them and T. S. Eliot you have the main models that underlie the New Criticism. That was an exciting thing. I was a student, and students are always excited by what's new, not by what's old. I was never a zealot for the New Criticism, but I was an admirer of it and found it interesting and exciting to read.

Williams Did it also have something to do with your experience of being in Cambridge?

Abrams I got a Henry Fellowship for a year, and when they asked me where I wanted to go, I said I wanted to go to Cambridge because I wanted to study with I. A. Richards. Then when I came back to Harvard, Richards came to Harvard as a University Professor, so I got to know him pretty well. He was a fascinating person.

Williams Did you work with him as a grad student?

Abrams The year I spent at Cambridge was after I got my bachelor's degree at Harvard. Richards was my supervisor, as they call it at Cambridge, a sort of a tutor, and I used to see him once a week. He'd assign me reading and we'd talk about it, and he'd show me letters he got from T. S. Eliot and so on. Eliot would send him some of his poems for his comments before he published them. So I found myself in the middle of the big literary goings-on of the time.

Williams Before they were published, in manuscript?

Abrams Yes. Richards would prop them up on his mantelpiece. Richards also introduced me to Yeats, who he said had become a great poet even though he believed in fairies. I was fortunate to work with Richards for that year. I used to see him when I was at Harvard afterwards, but I didn't do any formal graduate work with him.

Williams That's amazing. I know that there was a cluster of criticism that first appeared around then—Richards' *Principles of Literary Criticism* in 25 and *Practical Criticism* around 30 [29], Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle* in 31, Burke's *Counter-Statement* in 31, and Eliot's *Selected Essays* in 32.

Abrams You're right, exciting things were happening. Edmund Wilson's *Axel's Castle* was another very important book for me, which I read very early in my graduate career. The range of treatment across national lines, the kind of analysis you get there of Proust, for example, was terribly exciting. That's where the action was for the ambitious young students of the time.

Williams There also was a wave of new poetry. Harriet Monroe founded *Poetry*, I think in 1912, and then put out an anthology called *The New Poetry* in 1917 and 1926.

Abrams While I was a student, *New Signatures*, the first publication in book form of W. H. Auden and Spender and other young poets of that time, the Oxford Group, was sensationally new. I still have a copy of it somewhere, of the original edition of *New Signatures* that came out with a cardboard cover. It was an exciting time.

Williams You said that you later came to question the New Criticism. What caused that?

Abrams It wasn't the ultimate critical thing to do. It had its shortcomings. Cleanth Brooks always claimed that they were never against literary history, they believed in literary history. He himself in his original scholarly publications was a literary historian. But history was kept separate from the analysis of the poem. You wrote literary history or you did close reading of particular poems. That was an artificial separation because there's no doubt a poem is illuminated and enriched, or often makes sense only if you have some sense of the cultural—well, what we used to call "background," that we've now learned to call "context." And the fact is that the New Critics—the good ones—were good New Critics because they had been trained in the cultural context, the historical context, the history of literature. They brought it in quietly by the back door as though it were there, present before them, in the poem itself. For them it was in fact present, they could take it for granted, but only because of their training. But if you got a young person who knew nothing of this context, this background, the poem often didn't make good sense at all.

Williams One interpretation, for instance that Gerald Graff has in *Professing Literature*, is that the New Criticism was suited to the expanding university, with rising enrollments, because you didn't need a lot of background.

Abrams It was very teachable. There's no doubt that that was part of the reason for its acceptance; it gave teachers something to talk about to their students. Basically the rationale for the New Criticism was a solid one: it really confronted you with a poem, made you look at it in detail, work out the relations of its parts, and gave you a way of coming to grips with what, in its particularity, it effected. And that was new in literary discussion.

Williams Do you think it was a response to science? Or to give literature a separate space?

Abrams The New Critics tended to define literature in opposition to science, but literature had always, in earlier theorists, been defined in opposition to science or history or something else. That is, people have always tried to establish the identity of literature by opposing it to what it was not, or to what was supposed to be not literary, and science was just a rather latecomer on the scene. Aristotle opposed poetry—what we would now call literature—to history. In the eighteenth century it began to be opposed to science and the New Critics simply inherited that opposition. But I don't think the reason for the New Criticism was their opposition to science. It was their way of defining what poetry was, what they considered it to be.

Williams In some ways they tried to be almost as exacting as science, and they used a lot of scientific metaphors like "organic."

Abrams It's what de Man later would call "rigorous." They talked about sensibility, people's responses to things, but it was a matter of getting the exact emotional nuance in the poem they were reading. So they showed that you could be exact about something that was really not data at all.

Williams But it wasn't as wishy-washy as the impressionists before them like Spingarn.

Abrams The famous example of criticism of the impressionist sort used to be the statement by A. E. Houseman, "I don't know what good poetry is, all I know is if I'm shaving and a line of poetry comes in my head and my beard stands up so I can't shave it, that's good poetry." He said that to be clever, and it is clever. The New Critics said, "Oh my goodness! That's no criterion for poetry!" But I know exactly what Houseman meant; it's not intended to be an analysis of a poem.

Williams So the trajectory of criticism, in very broad terms, moves from impressionism and literary history to the New Criticism, and sometimes then people see it as moving to theory, but really in between was Frye and archetypal criticism.

Abrams By the way, the New Criticism is far from dead. Not only is it practiced by people who don't know they're practicing it, or who have profited from it without awareness, but one of the best poetry critics of our time, Helen Vendler, is essentially a New Critic. She stayed with it through thick and thin, and practices it and has applied it to brilliant writings on Herbert and all sorts of other poets. It's not dead, but she represents a minority now.

Williams The 60s seem to be an in-between time in criticism. There were people like Frye and Fiedler, although by the 70s things start moving toward what we call theory.

Abrams Well, all critics are theorists; they have a theoretical underpinning whether they're aware of it or not. But what we now call theory is, as far as I can make out, a proposed view of interpretation which is deliberately formulated to run counter to what is established and to yield new readings of old texts. So I think theories are designed, each in its own way, as a type of new reading of old texts. If you look back to earlier criticism for things that would meet that definition of theory, what would qualify would be Freudian criticism and Marxist criticism. Both are designed to look at old texts and give you new meanings which run counter to the established, traditional meanings. The first great, brilliant exemplar of the new type of grand theory is probably Northrop Frye, with *The Anatomy of Criticism* and the archetypal mode of reading. He wasn't the one that invented it, but he really developed it at the greatest length and took advantage of what had been going on in the analysis of myths and so on, and developed a comprehensive view that all literature is constituted by a repetition of archetypes of a definable sort.

Williams The way that the history is represented, I think that a lot of people have forgotten that time.

Abrams It's strange that Frye's book and what followed it was so exciting for a long time, but it has disappeared almost as quickly from the standard critical perspective.

Williams One thing that seems clear in my reading is that Marxist criticism was very prominent in the 30s. All the critical accounts in the 50s talk about it as if it went without saying, but it dropped out of the picture during the 60s. Was that something that you were aware of at Harvard?

Abrams I was well aware it was going on, but I didn't find it convincing. I'm always suspicious of the hermeneutics of suspicion. I'm always suspicious of a theoretical construct that undertakes to persuade you that what people have always taken a poem to be about is not only wrong but the opposite of the truth. That tends to be the paradigm for all sorts of recent theories of literature. It was the French theorist Ricoeur who used the phrase "hermeneutics of suspicion." He applied it to psychoanalytic and Marxist criticism, but it applies to all theories, in the new sense of Theory with a capital "T," which undertake to show, by a reconstruction of the nature of interpretation, that you can look at old poems and come out with new readings. I've been skeptical from the beginning of all attempts to show that for hundreds of years people have been reading wrong, or have missed the real point.

Williams To continue the trajectory, after Frye the next prominent movement was phenomenology?

Abrams Yes, phenomenology, the consciousness criticism that Hillis Miller first advocated, the Poulet school. Then came the structuralists, and then deconstruction as a revolt against structuralists, which had great momentum for a number of years, but which I predicted would fade. But all these things leave footprints; they fade out but leave something behind.

The people who did deconstruction were very bright people, but misguided. I never "dissed" them—I never disrespected them—I always found them admirable and I loved to argue with them because I think they were worth arguing against. You don't want to waste your time arguing against somebody who doesn't count or isn't bright. Of course I like to pretend that I'm a total traditionalist, but I'm not quite that stuck in the past; I'm open to well-grounded innovation.

Williams I thought that it was remarkable, in the debates over deconstruction, that you tried to deal with Derrida seriously and to make sense of what he was doing in terms of the English philosophical tradition—in comparison to Hume, for instance. We use this word "conversation" but I think how critical argument frequently happens is that it misses other arguments or goes on in two different planes. I thought that your essays responding to deconstruction tried to bring them into conversation with the British tradition, but they weren't trying to do that.

Abrams While I was waiting for you I glanced through an old essay of mine that's included in *Doing Things With Texts*, which is a collection of essays about Theory, among other things. It's called "A Colloquy on Recent Critical Theories." I deal there with Derrida and Hillis Miller and deconstruction, the New Criticism, the beginnings of New Historicism, and then with Stanley Fish and reader response criticism; and I find that all the things I said in that essay I'll still stand by. Such matters were fresher in my mind then than they are now. I used to live these things day after day, but in the last ten years or so I've done very little reading in what's going on in the critical world. However, when the time comes to bring out a new edition of the *Glossary of Literary Terms*, where I have essays about all critical theories—then I have to catch up fast.

Williams Speaking about deconstruction, I wanted to ask you about one person you don't write about as much, de Man, who was one of your colleagues at Cornell from 60 to 67.

Abrams He was a personal friend. He was a fascinating man and a brilliant one—but in a sense that's really independent of the discoveries that were made about his writings during the Second World War. I have to say that he seems to me to be a dishonest critic. He wrote to make a sensation. He said things he must have realized were designed to startle rather than to be valid. He was a glamorous person, and to students he was charismatic to a high degree. And that's without being handsome or attractive in the usual way, or having an attractive vibrancy in his speaking voice. It was not that. There was something about the very intricacy of his mental operations that

attracted people. But anyway—no, I didn't like to argue with de Man in print because I would have quickly gotten to the point where I would have had to assert that he must have known that what he said wasn't true.

De Man was a great phrasemaker, with phrases like “the New Critical close reading was not nearly close enough,” but I've never been able to understand the reverence some people had for de Man's essays. One of his devices was to pick up an old rhetorical term and give it twists in order to make it come out in a different way. I remember one of his essays in which he took a metaphor in Proust, and the whole point turned out to be that, when Proust used the metaphor “A is B,” he meant that to be a statement of identity of A and B; and that's a false claim. Who ever uses a metaphor to claim identity? It's taking the “is” of metaphorical comparison and identifying it with the “is” of identity. But an expression wouldn't be a metaphor if you were claiming identity. It would be the thing itself. De Man was full of rhetorical tricks of that sort.

Williams I'm probably more impressed now with the essays in *Blindness and Insight* than *Allegories of Reading*. He was a perceptive reader of other critics.

Abrams I think a good deal of his critical writings were a misapplication of very high talents. He was an enormously talented person.

Williams *The Mirror and the Lamp* was a very influential book, and the first chapter was a touchstone in basic criticism courses for years. But I was struck by a quote I read that you were surprised more than anyone else how much legs that the book has had. It's still in print 54 years later. I know that it was originally your dissertation, although it came out a number of years after.

Abrams After ten years of hard work revising the text. The title in fact was the title of my doctoral thesis. The title has been both a boon and a bane to the book. It's a boon in that it's a catchy title and nobody forgets it that's ever seen it. The trouble is that, like all titles that are not just baldly descriptive and uninteresting, it's misleading because people think the book is about mirrors and lamps and nothing else. The fact is those are only two of the metaphors I discuss that represent the relation of poetry to reality. The book deals with many root metaphors that I called “constitutive metaphors”; and I think one of the best things in the book (and some reviewers agreed with me) is the treatment of organic metaphors. To conceive the invention of a poem on the analogy with a growing plant, it's my treatment of that theme, I think, that is more revelatory and innovative than my treatment of metaphors of mirrors and lamps. But apart from that—the book deals with so much more than just the constitutive metaphors of literary criticism.

So the title is on the one hand attractive and on the other hand misleading. I wouldn't want to change it even if I could. I wouldn't want a bald title like *The Romantic Theory of Poetry* or something like that. One of the reasons I think that the book has been influential is its claim that we use root metaphors cognitively—in philosophizing, for example—as much as we do in poetry. That was revelatory to many people. I remember I was talking to a philosopher, a fellow graduate student, and I said that philosophy employs metaphors, and [he] was outraged—“Oh no, no. Metaphor is something only poets use.” Well, that metaphors are indispensable to a cognitive use of language has become a commonplace now, but at the time it seemed to be a radical novelty.

You're right, looking back: that first chapter was important because it made a kind of sense of the whole seeming chaos of critical theory. Suddenly you were able to classify the confusion of critical theories; and once you classify them, you can see how they fit together, how each tells a part of the story, not the whole story. It turned out to be an important chapter, but very hard to write. I rewrote it at least six times. But that is the thing that people tend to remember, the first chapter. That and the title.

Williams Lodge reprints the chapter in his anthology *20th Century Literary Criticism*.

Abrams Lionel Trilling also came out with an anthology of literary criticism, and he told me that the introduction is based on a mirror-and-the-lamp kind of analysis.

Williams You mentioned how metaphors affect or constitute how we think, and I wondered if you had done work in psychology, since I had read that during the war [WWII] you had worked in a lab researching psychoacoustics?

Abrams Yes, trying to solve the problem of oral communications in a noisy environment—not only gunfire but motor noises. But that had nothing to do with my critical work. I got interested in metaphor through I. A. Richards. He got me reading Bentham's theory of fictions, which is really a theory of metaphor—it deals with the role of metaphor in legal language, especially. When I came to deal with the history of criticism, it struck me immediately that there were key metaphors that distinguish one type of criticism from another.

Williams It strikes me that your work is really in the history of ideas, but it's a kind of intellectual history blended with literary history. *The Mirror and the Lamp* reevaluates Romanticism and sets out a history of literary ideas.

Abrams That applies even more to *Natural Supernaturalism*, which, just between you and me, is a more important book than *The Mirror and the Lamp*. *The Mirror and the Lamp* is the one that people know if they know anything about my writings, but the second book is more important. There's a neatness about *The Mirror and the Lamp*, and it does open out a way of dealing with cognitive matters, matters of theory and so on, in terms of constitutive metaphors, which is applicable outside of the realm of criticism. But *Natural Supernaturalism* is much wider in its scope. It has to do with what is much more humanly important than literary criticism.

Williams It seems as if it didn't hit its moment as *The Mirror and the Lamp* did. *The Mirror and the Lamp* came out right as the new wave of American criticism was cresting, and encapsulated ways of critical thinking.

Abrams That's right. It made sense out of criticism when doing criticism was the big, new thing.

Williams Whereas *Natural Supernaturalism* makes a broad claim that Romantic thought and literature represent a turn in Western culture, but even though Romanticism asserted a turn from the theological to the secular, it still bore the remnants of Christian culture.

Abrams The Hebrew-Christian paradigm translated. That's how innovative Romantic thinkers differed from the Enlightenment. Like *The Mirror and the Lamp*, as a title, *Natural Supernaturalism* was attractive but misleading. Four-fifths of the book is about other things than secularized theological paradigms. The chapter I'm most proud of in that book is the one where I deal with the parallel between metaphysical systems like Hegel's *Phenomenology* and Wordsworth's autobiographical *Prelude* and the modes of history being written at the time; there is, among them, a very close parallelism in the narrative construction. That seems to me new, enlightening, and tells you a lot about the nature of philosophy at that time and philosophy generally. I guess the book has gotten its share of notice.

Williams I don't think it's lacked attention.

Abrams But the book most people are aware of is *The Mirror and the Lamp*. I remember a graduate student once sent me, triumphantly, a novel he'd found, a nineteenth-century novel by an unknown, forgotten author, and it's called *The Mirror and the Lamp*. I've got a copy of it somewhere. I've never read it, but I should read it and find out what it's about.

Williams *Natural Supernaturalism* is a different kind of critical book ...

Abrams It's not about criticism. It's an intellectual and imaginative history of the Romantic period which deals with literature and metaphysics and history across the board. It's criticism in the sense that any book that deals with literature can be called literary criticism, but that's only one part of what it's about. It really deals with a broad spectrum of what happened, in intellectual and imaginative writing, before, during, and after the Romantic period.

Williams I see it more in keeping with books like Lovejoy's *The Great Chain of Being* and also C. S. Lewis's *Allegory of Love*, insofar as it has a big cultural view. Lewis makes a big claim that in the Middle Ages there's a change in our conception of love, and in *Natural Supernaturalism* you make that kind of large-scale claim. You have to be a

certain kind of scholar, you have to know a lot of the intellectual history, a lot of the history of the period, as well as the literature, to make that kind of claim. It doesn't seem as if people write those kind of books now.

Abrams I wrote during an era of important books that stake out a large claim. You're right. You mention two books that I greatly admire: *The Great Chain of Being* and *Allegory of Love*. There was a poll, about thirty or more years ago, conducted, I think, by somebody at Columbia. It asked, "What are the five most important books in literary theory and criticism of the last thirty years?" *The Mirror and the Lamp* is one of them, and *Allegory of Love* was another, together with *The Great Chain of Being*, and T. S. Eliot's *Collected Essays*, and *American Renaissance* by Matthiessen. That was the first time I became aware that people thought of *The Mirror and the Lamp* as important beyond its narrow reference to literary criticism.

Williams It was on the nonfiction list too, wasn't it?

Abrams That was more recent—number twenty-five in a list of the Most Important Nonfiction Books of the Twentieth Century. That's a big claim. Do people ever attend to *The Great Chain of Being* now?

Williams I don't think so.

Abrams That's a tremendous book. I'd put it near the top of the list myself. I owe so much to that book. I really learned a lot about writing intellectual history from that book.

Williams I think people still read *American Renaissance*. One of the reasons I mention it is that, as a critic writing now, you have to ask what is the kind of book one should try to write, and it seems it's hard to find a model like that.

Abrams Well, we've passed through the age of deconstruction. Hillis Miller wrote a review of *Natural Supernaturalism* in which he said that it's like Auerbach's *Mimesis*—and he mentioned two or three other powerhouse books—the point of which was that you can't write that kind of book any more because everything's undecidable. You're basing your historical claims on interpretations of texts; but such interpretations can't stand up because all these texts are undecidable, and disseminate into a tangle of contradictory meanings. An age of radical skepticism about our ability to say anything that can be understood is hardly an age that would foster the writing of big intellectual, cultural, and literary histories.

Williams I want to ask you about the *Norton*. I've researched anthologies, and it's clear that the *Norton* was very much a different kind of book than had come before. You didn't invent the anthology of course, but you invented ...

Abrams Some people seem to think I did. When I studied English at Harvard as a sophomore, we took a survey course and we used an anthology, Shafer I think was the name of the editor, and it was a pretty good anthology too.

Williams What were the anthologies like before the *Norton*?

Abrams What Norton did was introduce anthologies that looked like standard books; the prose and poetry would be printed in a single column on a page that's the size of a page in an ordinary book. All the anthologies that I'd seen before were large and were printed in double columns. Norton developed the use of Bible paper which would diminish the bulk of the book. That was the big Norton contribution. It was more expensive than other paper, and only certain presses could handle it.

George Brockway, the president of Norton, knocked on my door one day, in Goldwin Smith on campus and introduced himself and said he'd spoken to a classmate of his at Williams College, Bob Elias, who was an Americanist in my department, and asked, "Do you know anybody who could do an English literature anthology for us?" and Elias said, "Well, Abrams across the way here teaches a survey course in English literature." He came and saw me and persuaded me to try my hand at getting up an anthology.

I thought, "Well sure, why not; I'll try it." I based the anthology on the course I was teaching at Cornell in conjunction with David Daiches, who was then a professor at Cornell. I got Daiches as one of the other editors. One of the

innovations in the book, as it turned out—I thought we'd do it in a year and it took four years—was that it eliminated the snippet representations that you tend to get in earlier anthologies. As far as possible we printed complete works. Of course, that wasn't possible with *Paradise Lost* and *The Prelude*, but those we represented by substantial selections. Other things we either didn't put in or printed them complete.

Another innovation was to treat the choice and editing of the text just as carefully for undergraduates as we would have for scholars, using the same extreme care. So we chose the best possible texts—often, we had to pay for the use of them. Another thing: we got experts in each field, so we were a group of seven collaborative editors rather than a single editor or two trying to deal with everything “from *Beowulf* to Thomas Hardy”—which is the name of the anthology that had been assigned at Harvard. And we exerted great care in the annotations of the texts. Though these editorial matters were directed to undergraduates, they were just as meticulously crafted, and with as much attention to their relevance and validity, as if they had been directed to literary specialists.

Williams For the *Norton Anthology of Theory and Criticism* that I'm involved with, I'm among six other editors, and it's clear it's much better to spread the work and also to bring in several people's expertise.

Abrams That wasn't the way things were done before the *Norton*. I wouldn't say that we were the first to employ a large group of expert scholars, but the only anthologies I know of were edited by one, or at the most two people.

Another thing: the head notes and the introductions to the periods and so on were, again, very carefully written to be accurate, to take account of the latest information, and to be full, so that in the anthology you had the equivalent of a short history of English literature, eliminating the need for students to resort to auxiliary histories or criticism. The book was self-contained and complete. And we could boast, also, that the anthology was portable; you could read it anywhere—under a tree, in a bus, and so on. It's less portable now than it once was—the anthology gets bigger and bigger. But now you have the option of buying a separate volume for each literary period.

Williams One thing I noticed in the preface to the first edition, which came out in 62, was that you mention the balance between range and emphasis, which is, I think, the problem with any anthology. In my surmise the earlier anthologies were better on range, but they made fewer discriminations that would give you emphases. But you also wouldn't want it to be all great authors because then you lose the interstices.

Abrams The introduction and the notes and the head notes always took into account historical and biographical context. We never slighted that kind of thing. As a matter of fact, the very first edition included an interesting innovation that we dropped because people didn't use it; much later it suddenly became the vogue. We interspersed what we called “topics” containing contextual materials for each literary period. It was before its time. Now we've reintroduced such materials, in the wake of the New Historicism.

I remember Bob Adams, who was one of our seventeenth century editors, had a topic on how it occurred to someone in the seventeenth century to test the old view that a centipede wouldn't cross gunpowder. So he actually got a centipede, put it on the table, spread gunpowder, and the centipede crawled right over it. That really is a dramatic way of showing students the difference between legendary science and true experimental science. But that was only one of many topics.

Williams I'm curious about how the process went, especially because I've done my share of editing. Were there any difficult moments? You must have been very efficient.

Abrams I really picked very good people in each period—the best ones I knew. (Well, it was mostly my choice, though I got formal approval from the publisher.) Fortunately I'd known most of them personally before, and Bob Adams was a colleague at Cornell, and Daiches was also a colleague. One of the reasons we all got along so well is that we never met together as a group. We dealt with each other by mail. I don't think we'd ever all met as a group until the celebration at the MLA one year, when we all showed up when the anthology was first published.

I guess it was I who set up the criteria for our editorial work: the highest standards, but directed toward undergraduates, rather than specialists. Then we consulted by mail on what we would include. Basically, we started with

the materials I included in the survey course I taught at Cornell, and then added to that. The idea was not to force people to teach what you wanted them to teach, but instead to give them the equivalent of a small library from which they could select what they wanted to teach. The anthology is really a library of relevant materials made available to each instructor.

All questions that arose about choosing and editing the texts were circulated among the editors; in cases of disagreement, the final decision was mine. We never had important disputes. Somebody might grumble now and then, but it never came to anything. And that was true even for such a maverick as Robert Martin Adams, who always marched to his own drumbeat. Even he got along well, partly because I knew Bob and his idiosyncrasies, but more because we respected each other. But none of us expected the success of the anthology when it finally, after four or five years, hit the market.

Williams It must have been gratifying.

Abrams Don't forget that we did all this in the heyday of the New Criticism when, if people taught literature chronologically, they kept quiet about it. All the talk was about "the poem as such," "the poem itself," and so on. So the anthology was directed against what seemed to be the strong current of the non-historical, non-chronological study of literature. It turned out that there was a huge market for such an anthology. Many teachers were just waiting for something like it to be available. The adoptions were immediate and large.

Williams And the university went from four million students in 1960 to eight million in 1970.

Abrams That's certainly part of it. And books became increasingly expensive. So if you put together a survey course of English literature, using separate books for each author or group of authors, it would cost the student hundreds of dollars.

Williams And, alongside the *Norton*, you also did the *Glossary of Literary Terms*, which you took over in 57. Somebody told me—I don't know if this is apocryphal—that the *Glossary* has sold eight million copies.

Abrams No, no. The eight million copies was an estimate of the total sales, as of a couple of years ago, of the *Norton* anthology. It must be nine million or so by now. The anthology is used all over the world. The glossary has had very large sales too, but it's not anything like eight million. I don't know the exact total, but I'm now working on the ninth edition of the glossary. Can you imagine?

Williams Really? They're handy. They not only have definitions of terms like "metaphor" but mini-essays on, say, critical movements like deconstruction that are both knowledgeable and accessible.

Abrams Oh, they're very useful. You find everything you want to know—as well as all the stuff you don't need to know. But I said in the first edition what I've repeated ever since: it's a book I wish I'd had when I was an undergraduate. And the analyses of all the critical movements are original. They don't just repeat the standard comments. I refer to the *Glossary* myself when I forget something. I find it useful.

Williams You must have good work habits.

Abrams I've never been a very efficient worker, actually.

Williams Really? People would be surprised.

Abrams I don't even have a very good memory. I depend on miles of written notes, without which I'd be helpless. I work steadily, however. I used to go to my office seven days a week—to the despair of my wife—but not for a very long day. Some people would go for five days and stay eight hours each day. I couldn't do that. I'd go three, four hours a day, but every day, unless we had a social engagement, or were away on summer vacation. But it adds up—day after day after day after day. It adds up.

I had good guidance and good teachers. A. O. Lovejoy was one of my models.

Williams Was he at Harvard?

Abrams No, I just read his books. He did give the Charles Eliot Norton lectures at Harvard when I was there, but I only attended one of them. But I learned a lot from him. I learned a lot also from Richards, from his writings on metaphor, but also from his example of writing clearly on technical matters, and in ordinary language. Another important person for me was Ronald Crane at Chicago. He always argued with Lovejoy. With Lovejoy, the history of ideas was constituted by single ideas put together to form a pattern; he was a particularist, for whom each idea separately made sense. The emphasis of Crane, on the other hand, was on system: individual ideas change their character when they're put together in a systemic way. They're both right, of course. My own writing in intellectual history—and that would include *The Mirror and the Lamp*—tries to maintain a view of the system in which an idea occurs, and also to identify, and follow historically, the separate ideas.

I learned also from Alfred North Whitehead, who wrote *Science and the Modern World*. I used to skip the parts about his own philosophy, but studied closely the chapters about the impact of science on intellectual history and so on. Not as important to me as Lovejoy and Crane, but important. And T. S. Eliot. Eliot was a power when I was young.

Williams Speaking of when you were young, I wanted to ask you a couple of biographical questions. How did it come to be that someone from New Jersey ...

Abrams Long Branch, on the sea shore.

Williams How did you end up becoming a literary person or a man of letters?

Abrams Not by ambition but by accident.

Williams What did your father do?

Abrams My father started as a house painter, became a contractor, then opened a paint and wallpaper store in Long Branch, New Jersey. He was a hard worker. There was no tradition of learning in my family.

Williams Why did they send you to Harvard?

Abrams The principal of my high school was a man called Cate, and he used to pick his bright students and get them into Harvard. We had a small school, a graduating class of ninety or so, but in my class, three of us went to Harvard. You're not going to get that happening very often, but we had a bright class, and we all three went on scholarships to Harvard in 1930.

Williams Those must have been tight times.

Abrams Oh, yes. It was during the Great Depression. I had a vague intention of going to law school because everybody who didn't know what else to do at the time thought about law school. It was in the depths of the Depression, in the early 30s, when you weren't going to make a living no matter what you did. So I said, "I like reading English literature, I'll stay with that." Two things were decisive in determining my decision. First, I got a fellowship to go to Cambridge University, which assured me that I was not run of the mill and gave me a chance to look around and think a little. Second, my honors essay was published by Harvard. It's called "The Milk of Paradise" and it's about poets and novelists who took opium, which affected their writings. Those two events gave me the impetus and the daring to think I might be able to make it in teaching. It was a gamble because in those days there weren't any jobs in teaching, but there weren't jobs in any profession. So I thought I might as well enjoy starving instead of starving while doing something I didn't enjoy.

A special problem was the fact I was Jewish. When I was at Harvard as an undergraduate, I think there were one or two Jews on the total faculty—both converts. When I came to Cornell, there were two Jews on the faculty. But what broke the barriers against Jews in academia was the Second World War, both because of the Nazi persecution of the Jews for which many people felt they had to compensate, and because colleges were stripped of their faculties during the war. And then came the GI Bill, which flooded colleges and universities with mature and eager students, of whom many came from poor families without any tradition of attending college. Colleges, as a result,

had to build faculties in a hurry, and they couldn't afford to be prejudiced the way they used to; so they hired Jews and Catholics and Irish who had had difficulty breaking into faculty ranks. That was just a matter of lucky timing.

Before the war, it was phenomenal when a Jew made it onto a university faculty. I remember that the young Lionel Trilling published a book on Matthew Arnold, and it got ecstatic reviews. The story was told that Nicholas Murray Butler, who was then the president of Columbia, saw the reviews and said, "Who is this young fellow?" The upshot was that they made Trilling a professor. That was sensational at the time, to be tenured in English literature if you were Jewish. That was the first big breakthrough. The other breakthroughs came when Harry Levin was kept on at Harvard, where he had been an undergraduate, then a junior fellow. After that the floodgates opened.

Williams You finished at Harvard in 1940 and then worked in the psychoacoustics lab during the war. How did that come about?

Abrams I was at Harvard and had just gotten my PhD. I was already more than thirty years old and of no great interest to the army. The first course I taught at Harvard was called "The Psychology of Literature," and it was a summer session course, taught under the aegis of the psychology department. So I was known to the psychology department, when S. S. Stevens, a very distinguished experimental psychologist, was given the task of setting up a secret laboratory to work on the problem of communications in a noisy environment. He put together a group of young scientists to work on the problem, and he offered me the job. He asked, "Do you know anything about phonetics?" and I said, "Well, I know a little phonetics because I've been working in philology." He said, "I'd like you to join my staff," and I said, "I don't know anything about oral communications in noise," and he said, "Neither does anybody else. I want you because you think like a scientist." So I joined that laboratory; my wife got a job in the same laboratory as the secretary-treasurer.

Williams Then after the war you moved to Cornell. How did that happen?

Abrams When the war ended I was offered the job at Cornell. I came up here—I still had an appointment at Harvard and I could have stayed on in the English department there; but I was captivated by the atmosphere and the natural environment of Cornell.

Williams Really? You visited and liked it so much?

Abrams Yes. I had no intention of joining the faculty when I was invited for a visit, but came out of politeness. When they offered me the job I took it. Ithaca was a very attractive small town then, and the campus of Cornell was much more like that of a college than of a university. There were wooden faculty houses right on campus. It was very pleasant in those days, little traffic and no parking problems. If somebody had told me then that there'd soon be parking problems, I would have been incredulous.

Williams Any reflections on being in one place for so long? You didn't move around as some people do.

Abrams I liked the place the first time I saw it. Cornell's natural location is incomparable, and I love the open country. Cornell put together more of the things I value than any university I know of, so I was never tempted by offers elsewhere. Also, I just didn't like the way some people used universities and colleges and departments as though they were telephone wires from which to fly to the next higher wire when the opportunity arose. I didn't approve of that. I believe in striking roots, and feeling loyalty to the place where I am.

Williams Cornell seems to cultivate that more than most places I've been.

Abrams That's true. It instills in its faculty, and in its students, a sense of belonging, community, and loyalty. It's common among American alumni to feel close to their university; but that is especially the case at Cornell. I think that's partly because of Cornell's special history, being the youngest of the Ivy League colleges—after all, it was only started in 1865, with the famous motto, "Any person can find instruction in any subject." "Any person." Right from the beginning that meant male and female, and without respect to race, gender, or religion. It was a revolutionary institution when it started; it was often attacked as a godless university. People felt loyal to it early on, because it was innovative and under attack. Also, it was a rather strange anomaly, because the university is partly state, partly

private. In all these respects, Cornell is more American than any other university I know of. It's partly Midwest, it's partly East; it's Ivy League and yet it's not like the other colleges in the League; it's private yet a land-grant college; and it's a liberal arts college with an ag school—or what they used to call an ag school. So it's very American.

I think a main attraction, finally, is the charm of the landscape here and of the outdoor life it makes possible. It's a big university in a very rural environment, so that the tendency is inward. You can't spread out into the enviroing city for your cultural and other enterprises; you turn inward to the university. All these things seem to inspire great affection and loyalty in most of its alumni. You probably got the feel of it when you were here.

Williams I did [while at the Society for the Humanities in 2002-03]. It snowed a lot, though!

Abrams When I first came here in 45 we used to have ice skating on Beebe Lake every day. Each night they'd scrape the ice with a bulldozer and reflood it. Then the winters got so mild that, if the ice did form at all, it would crack up and refreeze in a way that made outdoor skating impossible. At that time I took up skiing because I got tired of my friends who skied saying, during a storm, "Goody! It's snowing!" I said if I can't beat em, I'll join em.

Williams One last question: could you tell me surprises you've had that changed the way you saw things, perhaps disappointments on the one hand, and good surprises on the other?

Abrams I find it hard to think of disappointments. Some things, of course, I would have preferred to go otherwise; but I even enjoy the kinds of critical movements that I disapprove of, because I enjoy a good intellectual fight. I enjoy a verbal exchange in print with somebody I disagree with, about what seem to me fundamental matters. I'm good-humored about it, because I really enjoy it. And I never argue with somebody I don't admire. I don't find it worthwhile to argue with somebody who isn't intellectually capable of responding in kind. So even my disagreements with what's happened in the literary and critical field aren't really disappointments.

As for good surprises, they're at the degree of success of the books I've published. I didn't expect the success of *The Mirror and the Lamp*, I didn't expect the success of the Norton anthology, I didn't expect the success of the *Glossary*. Yet I must confess, if I take down one of these books now and read in it, I often say, "My gosh, did I write that?" It still seems to me good and I still believe what I find that I once said. Just before you came I read, as I told you, my essay called "Colloquy on Theory," and it seems to me to stand up despite the passage of time. And that I find a source of gratification.

M. H. Abrams: A Life in Criticism

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By JEFFREY J. WILLIAMS

In literary studies, M.H. Abrams is an iconic name. It appeared as “general editor” for 40 years on nearly nine million copies of *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, and has also, in a detail that only scholars would know, led the indexes of many a critical book for a half-century. (In fact, one scholar I know cited “Aarlef” just to avoid that custom.) In addition, Abrams, now 95, stamped the study of Romantic literature: His book *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 1953) was ranked 25th in the Modern Library’s list of the 100 most important nonfiction books of the 20th century, and he was a prime participant in debates over literary theory, especially deconstruction, during the 1970s and 80s.

Last summer I interviewed Abrams — Meyer Howard, but he goes by Mike — at his home in Ithaca, N.Y., up the road from Cornell University, where he has been a professor since 1945 and still goes to his office in Goldwin Smith Hall. Colleagues at Cornell had held a birthday celebration for him, and among the gifts was an inscribed copy of Thomas Pynchon’s latest novel. Pynchon had been a student of Abrams’s in the 1950s and sent it on. Abrams has the book on the coffee table in his living room.

Talking to Abrams is like taking a course in literary history. He has seen major changes in the modern research university as well as in literary study. The son of a house painter and the first in his family to go to college, he started as an undergraduate at Harvard in 1930, as the country slid into the Great Depression. He went into English because, he says, “there weren’t jobs in any other profession, so I thought I might as well enjoy starving, instead of starving while doing something I didn’t enjoy.”

It was a small world then. After graduation, Abrams won a fellowship to the University of Cambridge, in England, where his tutor was I.A. Richards, an important figure who first promulgated “practical criticism” — interpreting particular poems in and of themselves, without reference to outside material like biography or history — and also early cognitive theory, paying attention to how one derives meaning. Through Richards, Abrams met W.B. Yeats and saw early versions of T.S. Eliot’s poems. “Eliot would send some of his poems [to Richards] for comments before he published them,” Abrams recalls, and Richards “would prop them on his mantelpiece.” He found himself, he says, “in the middle of the big literary goings-on of the time.”

When he returned to Harvard for graduate school in 1935, Abrams notes, it was “in the days when, to get a Ph.D., you had to study Anglo-Saxon, Old Norse, Old French, and linguistics, on the notion that they served as a kind of hard-core scientific basis for literary study.” (I will henceforth cease entertaining complaints from my graduate students about foreign-language requirements.) The academic study of literature was scholastic, oriented toward amassing recondite facts, obscure literary sources, and technical bibliographies.

That was changing, through the efforts of people like Richards and their students like Abrams. Criticism (engaging directly with literary works through “close reading”) rather than philology (accumulating historical data about them) was the new battle cry that drew Abrams and other “young bucks,” as he says. “That was an exciting thing, I was a student, and students are always excited by what’s new, not what’s old.”

The migration of literary critics from the public sphere into the university is often seen as a fall, but, as Edmund Wilson reflected in 1943, the institutional pressures of journalism had been no better and in many ways worse (Wilson remarked that they killed Poe), and academe provided a base for critics after the more-plush 20s. In turn, criticism enlivened academic study, especially teaching, for those in Abrams’s generation.

Today the New Criticism, the dominant approach to close reading from the 1940s until the 1960s, seems narrow and constraining. But then it was a striking invention, and Abrams reminds us of its patent. Earlier critics like

Coleridge or De Quincey had taken a short passage — for instance, the knocking at the gate in *Macbeth* — but “there’s no analysis applied to the whole of *Macbeth* until the New Critics,” he says. Abrams credits the New Critics with, like scientists, a precise focus — in this case, on “verbal particulars” and “analysis of the construction of a poem” that “opened it up” for readers.

Although contemporary theorists might consign Abrams to the New Criticism, he actually gravitated more toward intellectual history. He had “qualms about [the New Critics[’]] shortcomings,” he says, especially with their “careful avoidance of historical contextual matters as relevant to the understanding of a poem.” *The Mirror and the Lamp*, which is still in print, and Abrams’s other major book, *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature* (Norton, 1971), both look at the history and philosophy of the Romantic era in conjunction with the poetry.

Foregrounding that era, from the late-18th to the mid-19th centuries, was part of a shift in literary study. When Abrams started out, the basis of literary studies was in earlier periods and major figures like Spenser and Milton, and T.S. Eliot had dismissed the Romantic poets as inferior. Abrams helped turn the field toward the more modern sensibility of poets like Wordsworth and Shelley, who were more secular and concerned with problems of language and epistemology.

Another change Abrams experienced was demographic. Before the mid-20th century, most faculties were WASP-laden. Abrams, born into a Jewish family, observes: “What broke the barriers was the Second World War, both because of Nazi persecution of the Jews, for which many people felt they had to compensate, and because colleges were stripped of their faculties during the war. ... Colleges had to build faculties in a hurry and couldn’t afford to be prejudiced the way they were used to.” Abrams recognizes he benefited from his era’s kind of affirmative action — although it was still mostly “white bucks,” he adds.

The Mirror and the Lamp had been Abrams’s dissertation, and he also reminds us of a different era of academic production, when the tenure gun was not quite so impatiently pressed to a junior professor’s head. Abrams says he took “10 years of hard work revising the text,” rewriting the first chapter “at least six times.” It was worth it, since the chapter has been reprinted many times, probably because of its useful scheme of types of criticism, as mimetic (judging art as it represents life), pragmatic (concerned with the moral or social effect of art), expressive (seeing art as the outpouring of emotion), and objective (dispassionate analysis like that of Abrams’s contemporaries). The success of the book has surprised Abrams, and he thinks his later *Natural Supernaturalism* is, “just between you and me, a more important book.”

Now Norton’s literary anthologies are the standard, synonymous with the canon, but they began serendipitously, when somebody knocked on Abrams’s office door in the late 1950s. It was the Norton president, who had heard that Abrams was teaching a survey course and persuaded him to “do an English-literature anthology.” He reports that he thought, “Well sure, why not? I’ll try it,” and basically expanded the course he was teaching.

One of his innovations was to get help, gathering a group of seven editors who were experts in their fields — instead, says Abrams, of the usual “single editor or two trying to deal with everything from Beowulf to Thomas Hardy.” Remarkably, the editors did not meet as a group until after the anthology came out, which was the secret to its efficient completion, according to Abrams: “None of us expected the success of the thing when it finally, after four or five years, hit the market.”

Another innovation was that it “eliminated the snippet representations” in favor of complete works and incorporated introductions to each literary figure, “so that in the anthology, you had the equivalent of a short history of English literature.” And it was all portable, printed on a normal rather than an oversize, double-columned page, and on onionskin to keep it light. For Abrams, the key “was not to force people to teach what you wanted them to teach, but give them the equivalent of a small library from which they could select what they would want to teach.”

Perhaps the most remarkable thing about Abrams’s career is that he has kept up for more than 60 years. Through the 1970s and 80s, he sorted through and questioned new schools of literary theory like deconstruction and theo-

rists like Stanley Fish and Jacques Derrida, whom he found compelling but disagreed with. He adds, "I've been skeptical from the beginning of attempts to show that for hundreds of years people have missed the real point," his chief quarrel with contemporary theory. While affable, Abrams doesn't shy from debate, even with his former student, Harold Bloom, saying, "I enjoy a good intellectual fight, with somebody I disagree with, about what seem to be fundamental matters."

Today he is more interested in ecology but still works on the *Norton* and revises his best-selling *Glossary of Literary Terms* (Rinehart, 1957) every few years. Looking back, he says, "I didn't expect the success of *The Mirror and the Lamp*, I didn't expect the success of the Norton anthology, I didn't [expect] the success of the glossary, [but] I must confess, if I take down one of my essays now, it still seems to me good, and that I find a source of gratification."

M. H. Abrams: Biographical Data

M. H. (Meyer Howard) Abrams, the Class of 1916 Professor of English Literature Emeritus, has been a member of the English Department at Cornell University since 1945. He is an authority on 18th and 19th century literature, literary criticism, and European Romanticism, and is the author of *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition*, which received the Phi Beta Kappa Christian Gauss Prize in 1954, and *Natural Supernaturalism: Tradition and Revolution in Romantic Literature*, which won the James Russell Lowell Prize in 1972. In 1984, he was the second recipient of the Award in Humanistic Studies, which was established in 1976 by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences; in 1987 he was given the Distinguished Scholar Award by the Keats-Shelley Society; and in 1990 the Award for Literature by the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.

Professor Abrams came to Cornell in 1945 as an assistant professor and was appointed associate professor in 1947. He was promoted to the rank of full professor in 1953. In 1960 he became the first Frederic J. Whiton Professor of English Literature and in 1973 succeeded to the Class of 1916 Professorship; he is currently the Class of 1916 Professor Emeritus.

He received the Ph.D. degree in 1940 from Harvard; in 1934-35, he attended Cambridge University, England, as a Henry Fellow. From 1942 to 1945 he was a research associate in the Psycho-Acoustic Laboratory at Harvard University.

He has been awarded the honorary degree, Doctor of Humane Letters, by a number of universities, including the University of Rochester (1978), Northwestern University (1981), the University of Chicago (1982), Carleton College (2003), and Yale University (2007).

In 1963 Professor Abrams was elected to membership in the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, and in 1972 to the American Philosophical Society; in 1988 he was elected a Corresponding Fellow of the British Academy.

He has been the recipient of two Guggenheim Fellowships, one in 1957 and another in 1960, a Ford Foundation Fellowship in 1952, and a Rockefeller Postwar Fellowship in 1946. In 1953 he was a Fulbright lecturer at the Royal University of Malta, and has been made an honorary permanent member of the faculty. Professor Abrams delivered the Roache Lecture Series at the University of Indiana in 1963, the Alexander Lectures at the University of Toronto in 1964, the Ewing Lectures at UCLA in 1975, and the Cecil Green Lectures at the University of British Columbia in 1980, and was the Lamont Visiting Professor at Union College in April, 1995. He was a Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in Behavioral Sciences at Stanford, Calif., 1967-68, is a member of the Academy of Literary Studies, and Honorary Senior Fellow at the School of Critical Studies at Cornell University, a member of the Founders' Group of the National Humanities Center, and chairman of the Council of Scholars, The Library of Congress. He was visiting Fellow at All Souls College, Oxford University, in 1977. Professor Abrams' book, *The Mirror and the Lamp*, was cited in 1957 in a poll of 250 critics and professors of literature as one of the five "works published within the last thirty years which ... have contributed most to an understanding of literature"; and in 1999, it was ranked twenty-fifth in a list of "the 100 Best Nonfiction Books Written in English during the 20th century." He has also written *The Milk of Paradise* (1934, reprinted 1970), *A Glossary of Literary Terms* (1957, 9th edition 2008), *The Correspondent Breeze: Essays in English Romanticism* (1984), and *Doing Things with Texts: Essays in Criticism and Critical Theory* (1989). He has edited *The Poetry of Pope* (1954), *Literature and Belief* (1958), *English Romantic Poets* (1960, revised 1975), *The Norton Anthology of English Literature* (1962, 7th edition 2000), *Wordsworth: A Collection of Critical Essays* (1972), and (with Jonathan Wordsworth and Stephen Gill) *Wordsworth's Prelude, 1799-1850* (1979). He is a frequent contributor to literary journals and to collections of critical essays, and is on the board of editors of the "Cornell Concordances," of the "Cornell Wordsworth," and also of several critical journals.

Professor Abrams lives at 378 Savage Farm Drive in Ithaca, New York.

A Bibliography of M. H. Abrams

through December 2009

as prepared by Dianne Ferriss

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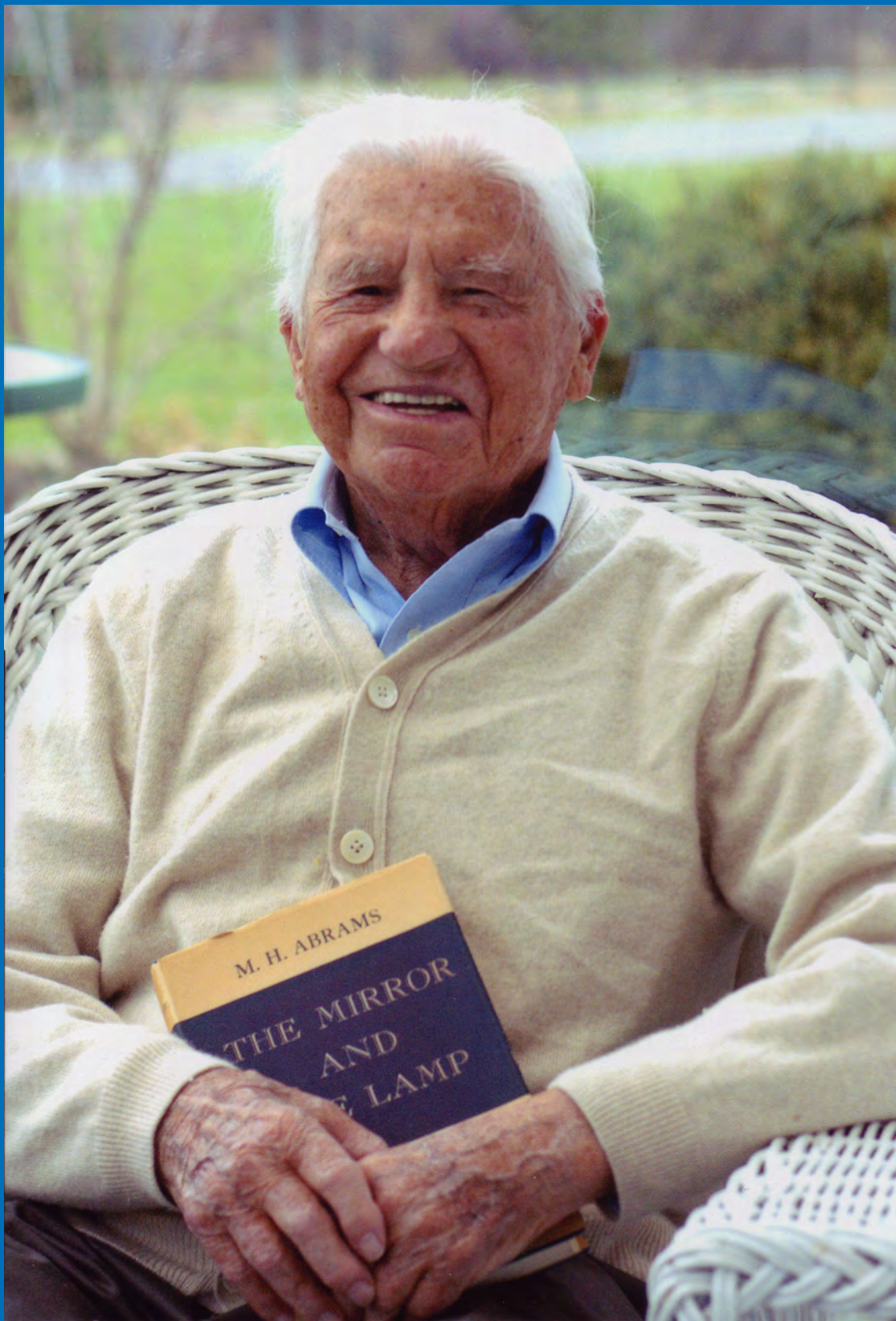


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M. H. Abrams at Cornell University

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