Dear Readers,

I trust that the waning of winter is a relief to all, even those of us who were treated to a milder version of the season than we have met in past years. Whatever welcomes the warming at your door, I hope that it brings with it satisfying times.

I would like to preface my usual introduction of the content awaiting your readership with some insights gleaned from an article by Jonah Lehrer that I read recently in the Wall Street Journal, entitled “How to Be Creative.” In anticipation of the scoffing that will likely attend hearing of such an aim, I first want to acknowledge that I approached the piece with a great degree of skepticism in response to its suggestion that one who were to read it would be treated to a guide on how to be more creative, feeling that the very notion of teaching a person to be creative is incongruous with the nature and identity of creativity. But, it was recommended to me on the premise that it justified my proclivity for night-owly hours, so I took a gander. Though I do not believe the article did what its headline promised—all Type A’s looking to infuse their stark, straight-lined worlds with ebullience, be forewarned; you will not put down the paper and suddenly start to fashion furniture out of found objects or write a poem to end all poems—in failing to meet that highest of expectations it set for itself, it did manage to exceed those I had for it.

The author provided an overview of the recent advancements in cognitive science that are leading to a better understanding of what parts of the brain are responsible for producing and practicing creativity, and why particular activities—many of which are familiar to us as stereotypical behaviors of the imaginative eccentric—enhance, whether measured by frequency or felicity, creative output. The section that struck me most was the mounting evidence that exposing oneself to new ideas, interacting with people who hold views that are disparate from one’s own, attempting to solve problems that are not directly related to one’s expertise, and revisiting old issues in a novel way, all lead to greater ingenuity. Greater, but not just in the discrete, dictionary-derived senses of “more in quantity” or “more in quality”: if one considers how distance is calculated—for those who avoid math like it’s leprosy, think back to the chant from Algebra I, “rate times time equals distance”—and is willing to accept “quality times quantity equals greatness” as an analog, this is what I mean by “greater.”

Using the success of outsiders attempting to solve complicated, longstanding problems in fields other than their own as evidence, as well as anecdotes about the Wright Brothers and Steve Jobs, Lehrer makes a convincing argument that much of creativity is not a result of some inborn spark, unattainable for those to whom it was not bequeathed by breeding, but a practice of drawing together distant notions and combining them in a manner not yet undertaken: “For prompting creativity, few things are as important as time devoted to cross-pollination with fields outside our areas of expertise [...] It’s this ability to attack problems as a beginner, to let go of all preconceptions and fear of failure, that’s the key to creativity.”

Upon reading this article and being so struck by its content, I gained an even greater appreciation for the pieces in this issue of Literary Matters, which I already took to be inventive and well formed, but now also see as the practice of creativity, rather than only a product of it. The first piece, “Time & the River at the Vermont Studio Center” (continued next page)

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In addition to the feature articles housed in this issue are the recurring News and Announcements and Poets’ Corner sections. This issue’s News and Announcements offer up introductions to the most recent additions to the fleet at the Association’s Boston office. Beginning with a special “Meet the Interns” column, in which volunteer staffers Isaac Goldman and Simon Mendes offer up mini-memos, and concluding with a profile on Office Assistant Allison Vanouse, you will be pleased to make the acquaintance of these promising new faces. Closing out the issue is the Poets’ Corner, which holds instances of creativity in the flesh; a poem each from Steven Shankman and Jillian Saucier.

As I write this letter, I cannot help but think back to somewhere around this time last year when I sat down to craft my first address as editor of Literary Matters, and was worried about how to begin, and tentative because, until that time, my sensibilities as a writer and my sensibilities as an editor had only crossed paths in compositions that few, if any other than myself, would be destined to read. This being my fourth issue as editor—its release will mark a year at the post—I find my current methods for constructing and compiling the newsletter almost unrecognizable when compared to those I employed at the onset of my editorship. This is, in part, owing to the fact that each issue has come about during times of change for the ALSOWC, and moreover, during distinct phases of refocus in my own life as well. Yet I am not so pliable that the circumstances of my personal life or the organization’s natural evolution can be held responsible. What we are really looking at here is growth, adaptation, a natural shifting of behaviors towards what is more suitable, given the requirements imposed by a particular environment. In a sense, I am editing my editing.

I bring this up not because I wish to get all googly-eyed and nostalgic over what is not especially sensational, but because, in thinking about the theme of creativity’s lifelong being so deeply tied to the daily and the creative, I wonder how an individual can preserve imagination while pursuing pragmatic goals. It would be a gross misapprehension of Lehrer’s article to deduce that refining a skill invariably stymies inspired or vibrant work. Rather, the task seems to be one of being watchful always to ensure that we do not incur myopia when pursuing mastery. I invite those of you who have subscriptions on the interplay of inspiration and prowess, advice springing from challenges faced during creative endeavors, or anecdotes of successes achieved to submit them, whether as a letter to the editor or in a more elaborate format, for inclusion in the next issue of Literary Matters. It is my hope that we can create an ongoing dialogue about the difficulties that those involved in all aspects of the literary field inherently face, and how to overcome them.

I am about ready to wrap up, but must first make a few acknowledgements. I want to express my appreciation to all those who contributed their labors to this issue. I feel continually fortunate to have the opportunity to collaborate with and read the work of such talented people. Many thanks to you all for your time and dedication. I also want to congratulate all those who toiled so tirelessly to orchestrate the recently held Claremont Conference, and those who presented there as well. A report on the Eighteenth Annual Conference will appear in the next issue of Literary Matters, but I can assure you that without commending your good work, Bravos all around!

With that said, I may now conclude: I hope you enjoy this issue, and I look forward to the next round of submissions headed my way. All the best,

Samantha Maduasy

LITERARY MATTERS

The Association of Literary Scholars, Critics, and Writers (ALSCW) promotes excellence in literary criticism and scholarship, and works to ensure that literature thrives in both scholarly and creative environments. We encourage the reading and writing of literature, criticism, and scholarship, as well as the interweaving of discussions among those committed to the reading and study of literary works.

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LITERARY MATTERS is provided to all ALSOWC members. Membership dues start at $37 for the first year ($32 for students) and are charged on a graduated scale thereafter. Premium Memberships are also available. No part of this newsletter may be copied or reproduced without permission from the ALSOWC.
New Editors at Literary Imagination

Helaine L. Smith is the new editor-in-chief of Literary Imagination and will be moderated by Adam Bradley of the University of Colorado. Mr. Meringoff has also given us the support and which will simplify our payment system.

4. New Editors at Literary Imagination

We welcome Saskia Hamilton of Barnard College and Archie Burnett of Boston University's Editorial Institute, the new co-editors of Literary Imagination, who will commence their work on the journal this spring. We are grateful for the Herculean labors of Greg Delanty, Sarah Spence, Christopher Ricky, and Tim Petason in editing the transitional issue of Literary Imagination, which has just gone to bed. Literary Imagination will have a new look this spring, thanks to a redesign of the periodical overseen by Greg Delanty. Our new financial arrangements with Oxford University Press, negotiated last year, stabilize our relationship with OUP and have helped put our Association on sounder financial footing.

5. Membership Renewals and Conference Registrations

Attendance at the Claremont Conference seems to be in keeping with the attendance numbers at the meetings for the last few years. Three weeks out, we had a little more than seventy registrations, and as the event nears, participants numbered closer to one hundred fifty. Considering that this is the first meeting on the West Coast in many years, at a new time of year for us, and only four-and-a-half months after our last gathering, we have ample reason to be proud of our registration rates.

Our annual dues renewal process started on New Year’s Day, and already better than two hundred of our members have renewed, in addition to all of our Lifetime Members. We know that many who plan to renew have not yet made the time to do so. If you have not already renewed your membership for 2012, expect to be pestered by me soon. You can renew your membership at http://www.alscw.org/member.html, or you can mail your completed membership form to the Boston office with a check made out to “ALSCW” if you prefer to pay your dues in this manner.

6. New Membership Software

We plan to move to a new membership software system this spring, which we expect will iron out some of the practical issues we have had in dealing with our database system, and which will simplify our payment system. We expect the transition from our current online database system to a true membership software system to go smoothly.

I wish you all an exciting and rewarding spring!

Regards,
John Burt

To contribute to Literary Matters, please send articles to literarymatters@alscw.org. Content ranges from columns on neglected authors, to interviews with those working in the literary field, to scholarly analyses of a text, and beyond. Please do not hesitate to contact the editor with any questions you may have.

Submissions for Issue 5.2 must be received by May 15, 2012.
Profile on Allison Vanouse, the ALSCW’s Office Assistant

Allison Vanouse was born in 1987 in Oswego, New York, to a professor in the SUNY Oswego English department and a civil servant. The geographical peculiarities of her hometown—profoundly beautiful stretches of empty lakeshore, a horizon dotted with nuclear and coal-burning power plants—continue to influence her aesthetic sensibility. She owes much to very early encounters with Shakespeare’s plays, the films of Ingmar Bergman, The Interpretation of Dreams, and the work of her older brother, new media artist Paul Vanouse. Upon leaving high school, Allison received scholarships from the National Shakespeare Competition (as a finalist, she had the opportunity to perform at Lincoln Center) and from the James Joyce Society for an essay about A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man.

In 2005, Allison enrolled at Brandeis University, where she studied under former Secretary of the ALSCW William Flesch and current President of the Association, John Burt. She moved to Paris in 2008 to study aesthetics under the tutelage of Jacques Derrida at the Sorbonne, and engaged in a dance composition workshop with Susan Hamlin, formerly of the Martha Graham Company. Her studies were synthesized upon exposure to Peter Brook’s production of Beckett’s fragment plays, which had opened that spring at Bouffe du Nord. Allison reluctantly returned to the United States in the summer to perform at the Berkshire Theater Festival, and finished her term at Brandeis while working on her thesis, assuming artistic direction of a student theater company, and taking on a peer-teaching engagement in Gordon Fellman’s class on Marx and Freud.

Allison graduated in 2009—with majors in English and American Literature, European Cultural Studies, and Theater Arts—summa cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, and with highest honors for her thesis, a dialogue on the context of utterance entitled “How Do You Are?,” which was presented as a processional performance through the parking lots behind the university. She received the J. V. Cunningham Writing Award, the Esther Pine Memorial Prize, and a Max Kade Research and Travel Grant that brought her to Berlin and Venice in the summer of 2009.

Since graduation, Allison has worked extensively as an actress, spending a term at the Saratoga International Theater Institute, touring New England with ShakespeareNOW—a company specializing in productions for high school students and the incarcerated—and holding solo performances of Samuel Beckett’s Not I. Allison frequently collaborates on new plays and performance art, and has shown work at MEME Gallery, The Acteon Project, Mobius Artspace, and Front Box, as well as in various alternative spaces. Her most recent play, Projection, is set to be published by Spirited magazine in March of 2012, and will be produced at 549 Columbus in Boston.

Allison was introduced to the ALSCW’s Office Manager, Ben Mazur, after the publication of his play, The Rain. A former student of President John Burt, and now a friend of Ben’s, Allison was brought into the fold of the Association, and has since been working diligently at the Boston office on member registrations and finances. She lives in Somerville, Massachusetts with poet Miguel Miró Quesada.

If you would like to see news of recent honors or awards you have received, notices for upcoming events of interest to ALSCW members, or information about Local Meetings you have hosted or are hosting included in Literary Matters, please send materials (photographs, text detailing all relevant information, and so forth) to literarymatters@alscw.org by the submission deadline for Issue 5.2: May 15, 2012.

Time & the River at the Vermont Studio Center
by Joshua Weiner

For writers who teach, one big problem is finding time—specifically, contiguous blocks of hours—in which to dream and float in imagining duration, out of range, reach, and rut. We may set routines in order to isolate and protect writing time during teaching semesters, but the fence is too easily breached: by students (some beloved, others not so much); by colleagues (especially chairs with new committee assignments); by friends hungry for lunch; and, for some of us, by children, and their homework, and their athletics, and their crises (learning opportunities!). Add to it all the middle class tyranny of repairs, laundry, bills...With the demands of life at home and on the job, carefully erected fences and locked gates turn into revolving doors.

When possible, it’s good to blow town.

* * *

My town is Washington, DC. Drive ten hours, according to the GPS, and you’ll reach the town of Johnson, Vermont, about forty miles east of Burlington and one hundred miles from Montreal. One night last September, I drove through it while looking for it; I then turned around, and drove back through it again. You have arrived at your destination; your destination is on the left. Now it’s on the right. No, you missed it.

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Johnson is a small town: you can walk through it in ten minutes—maybe less—and the Vermont Studio Center seems to be a lot of it, having renovated old farm buildings, such as churches, mills, and family homes, into a town campus of artists’ and writers’ studios. I shared the first floor of a modest old house with another writer (writer-slash-artist), Charlie Kearns, who drove over from the Midwest. Others came from farther away: England, Germany, Poland, Korea, Nigeria, Kenya, Japan, Austria, Ukraine, Guatemala. Of the fifty to some artists and writers in residence, one third came from overseas, an unusually high percentage for this kind of place. Lots of foreigners made table talk more interesting than it might have been; the varying cultural traditions of the different kinds of art-practice complicated my feeling that contemporary art is often pervaded by a kind of internationalism.

I was captivated by the vital materiality and transcendent affects of painting, sculpture, and installations by artists hip to the larger contemporary art world but also deeply invested in their vernacular and indigenous situations (I won’t soon forget the life-size deer that Victor Nyakauru, a sculptor from Zimbabwe, was making out of welded rebar and concrete, or the visionary rendering of mountain temples that Karma Wangdi, a painter from Bhutan, dreamt of and then studied it off, flowed with mesmerizing complexity as it hit jutting boulders, stone beds, and bridge columns, creating all kinds of turbulence, whirlpools, and streams shearing off and rejoining, I studied it off and on for hours as I read and wrote through the day.

My mornings started with thirty minutes of meditation in a little on-site zendo created by the VSC founders to sustain their own practice. Often the room was full, but other times I sat there by myself, or with Karma, the painter from Bhutan, who made the whole affair feel very authentic, which I realized was a problem. Just because he had been sitting in meditation for decades didn’t make the experience any better or worse, but I sometimes felt I was in a charged atmosphere at a residency such as the VSC: a feeling of both the limitlessness of being “in the zone” and the urgency of a deadline. There’s a shared feeling of common purpose, regardless of where people are in their work, which, in the best instances, supercedes most issues of talent, career, or the inescapable feeling of social vulnerability that attends encounters between artists and writers. It really was encouraging, sometimes even inspiring.

More inspiring still at the end of that month was a performance by the guitarist Bill Frisell, in residence with his wife, the painter Carol D’Inverno-Frisell. Bill Frisell, there for the second fall in a row (and owning his own Johnson Wool vest), had become friends with a young violinist, Roland Clark, the son of Gary Clark, the VSC’s Writing Coordinator. Following a stunning reading by Doug Powell, these two—Clark and Frisell—played together with startling, brilliant intimacy. To hear Frisell’s endlessly inventive harmonic-suiting intertwine with the precarious melodic sophistication of the violin was a rare gift. It was time to go. After my last morning of sitting in the zendo, I asked Karma how long he had been practicing meditation. “Oh,” he said, “I’ve never done it before coming here! Myfirst name is my father’s horse, and my last name is a monk’s I’ve never met. I thought it was all bullshit.” We laughed in the new cool. You could taste winter in the air, and I left him to fill my travel mug with fresh coffee.

Joshua Weiner is the author of two books of poetry, From the Book of Giants (2009), and From the Book of Giants (2008), as well as the editor of At the Barriers: On The Poetry of Them Gone (2009), all from University of Chicago Press. His new book of poems will be published in 2015. The recipient of a Whiting Writers Award and the Rome Prize, he is associate professor of English at University of Maryland College Park, and lives in Washington, DC. He can be contacted at jweiner1@umd.edu.

Whatever level of membership you choose, you will be doing a great service to literature and the humanities by supporting the ALSCW. A complete explanation of membership benefits, rights, and privileges is available at the web address noted above, should you wish to read more about the terms of membership in the Association.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact the ALSCW office at office@alscw.org, or by calling 617-358-1900.

Thank you for your support!

A FRIENDLY REMINDER TO RENEW YOUR MEMBERSHIP:

Our members are essential to the growth and success of our organization—the papers you present at the Conferences, the articles you contribute to our publications, and the Local Meetings you host and attend embody the very mission we seek to achieve.

We rely on your membership to further our aims as an association, and to continue providing arenas in which you all may gather to further your own. Please take a moment to renew your membership for the 2012 calendar year.

To renew your membership with the Association for 2012, please visit http://alscw.org/join.html. To pay by check, please mail your completed membership form—available on page 22 of this issue of Literary Matters—along with a check made out to ALSCW to the Boston office: 630 Beacon Street, Suite 510, Boston, MA 02215.

To make your donation to the Association, please visit http://alscw.org/donate.html. You may donate at any level, and your gift will help continue providing arenas in which we may gather to further our aims as an association.

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Ever since the late 1940s, various schools of literary interpretation have come and gone with alarming regularity, and we seem now to be on the cusp of another revolution of fortune’s wheel. Like Mark Twain’s obituary, early reports of the death of Poststructuralism may have been greatly exaggerated, but there is no doubt that the calls for intellectual reform articulated, for example, in Theory’s Empire (Columbia University Press, 2005) are gaining credibility and momentum. Harvard’s magisterial Louis Menand sums up the need for change with the terse observation that “university literature departments could use some younger people who think that the grownups got it all wrong.” Or, in other words, they could use some new scholars whose truth-claims will prove more reliable and durable than those of their predecessors.

Unfortunately, Menand blithely dismisses the exciting new school of literary theory that would most likely accomplish that very goal as a “bargain with the devil”—his contemptuous term for the emerging discipline of consilient literary studies commonly known as Literary Darwinism (Yes, I know—“Literary what?” is precisely what I said when I discovered it quite by accident around five years ago). Whether known by its most familiar nom de guerre—or by the less common but equally useful terms biocultural criticism, adaptationist literary study, or biopoetics—this bold new program of literary research seeks to produce more reliable and durable data than those of their predecessors. It tackles the question of genre identity: does it grow out of the sexual dimorphism common to all species, or is it a uniquely human social construct amplified by Western cultural biases? It carries the heroes and heroines of world folktales conform not only to the gender stereotypes of popular culture, but also to the universal mate criteria discovered by David Buss in his landmark 1989 study of thirty-seven cultures spanning six continents. Indeed, taken together, Gottschall’s studies suggest that world folktales embody at some deeply primordial level a Darwinian metanarrative whose theme is reproductive fitness.

In The Rape of Troy (Cambridge University Press, 2008), Gottschall’s major contribution to canonical literary scholarship, he argues that precisely the same theme drives the action of Homer’s Iliad. According to the conventional wisdom, Menelaus’ quest to retrieve his abducted wife is mainly a pretext to seize territory and spoils, and to achieve immortal fame in the process. But from the evolutionary perspective, the conventional wisdom confuses proximate motives with ultimate motives. Combining research from classical scholarship, archaeology, anthropology, and evolutionary biology to support his uncommonly sensitive textual analysis, Gottschall argues that “all forms of Homeric conflict result from direct attempts, as in fights over women, or indirect attempts, as in fights for social status and wealth, to enhance Darwinian fitness in a physically and socially exacting ecological niche.” Seen from this perspective, Achille’s rage and refusal to fight is not merely a convenient pretext for the action, but is the crux of the underlying theme.

Gottschall’s hypothesis situates human behavior squarely within a universal paradigm: across all known species, fierce intra-male rivalry for mating opportunities is the norm. The sociobiological rationale for this widely observed behavior is provided by Robert Trivers’ parental investment theory, which predicts that the “lower investing” sex will always compete to produce the greatest number of offspring, or to achieve preferred access to the “higher investing” sex. The occasional species, such as seahorses, for which sex roles are reversed only help to prove the rule.

Moreover, since the competition will axiomatically favor the most dominant males, it will also tend to favor polygynous mating, especially given a scarcity of environmental affordances—explaining, for example, why monogamous mating is so rare among nonhuman mammals, or why eighty-three percent of the world’s societies remain polygynous. In the case studies that demonstrate how, by “shrinkling the space of possible explanation” for literary phenomena from plenitude to parsimony, we can escape the labyrinth we have created for ourselves.

In the first two studies, Gottschall analyzes a comprehensive sample of world folk tales to interrogate the cultural myths that valorize female beauty and romantic love. If those myths were historically contingent, then one would expect evidence of differing cultural norms from a wide historical and geographical base of data. However, the research conclusion—based on data extracted by undergraduate coders ignorant of the research hypothesis—is that the presumed Euro-Western social constructs are actually cultural universals. Gottschall’s third case study, which undergirds the other two, tackles the question of gender identity: does it grow out of the sexual dimorphism common to all species, or is it a uniquely human social construct amplified by Western cultural biases?

The sociobiological rationale for this widely observed behavior is provided by Robert Trivers’ parental investment theory, which predicts that the “lower investing” sex will always compete to produce the greatest number of offspring, or to achieve preferred access to the “higher investing” sex. The occasional species, such as seahorses, for which sex roles are reversed only help to prove the rule. In The Rape of Troy (Cambridge University Press, 2008), Gottschall’s major contribution to canonical literary scholarship, he argues that precisely the same theme drives the action of Homer’s Iliad. According to the conventional wisdom, Menelaus’ quest to retrieve his abducted wife is mainly a pretext to seize territory and spoils, and to achieve immortal fame in the process. But from the evolutionary perspective, the conventional wisdom confuses proximate motives with ultimate motives. Combining research from classical scholarship, archaeology, anthropology, and evolutionary biology to support his uncommonly sensitive textual analysis, Gottschall argues that “all forms of Homeric conflict result from direct attempts, as in fights over women, or indirect attempts, as in fights for social status and wealth, to enhance Darwinian fitness in a physically and socially exacting ecological niche.” Seen from this perspective, Achille’s rage and refusal to fight is not merely a convenient pretext for the action, but is the crux of the underlying theme.

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The Rape of Troy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), p. 3.


Polygyny is preferable to “polygamy” not only because it is the more precise term, but also because it calls attention to the fact that polygyny is historically a common mating practice, whereas polyandry is extremely rare—see, for example, Bobbi S. Loe, Why Sex Matters: A Darwinian Look at Human Behavior (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 57–76.
resource-scarce environment of the archaic Hellenes, where polygyny was synonymous with aristocracy, the incentives for young men to prove their worthiness in combat would have been very high, just as among modern day primordial societies like the Yanamamo of the Amazon basin. For the victorious, the reward would have been a “direct fitness payoff” in proportion to their valor; captured slave women and enhanced marriage prospects back home. For those who fell nobly, there would have been an “indirect fitness payoff” for their kin in the form of enhanced social status. As for those who fought poorly or ran, one can turn to Helen’s contempt toward Paris for a trope of status in life.

The cultural ecology of Homer’s world seems so remote from New York Society’s gilded age that we might suppose there could be few, if any, behavioral homologies. But Judith S. Carroll suggests just the opposite in her definitive new contribution to Edith Wharton scholarship, Reading Edith Wharton Through a Darwinian Lens:

Edith Wharton may seem at first glance to be an unlikely object of attention for Darwinian literary analysis [...] Beneath the polished surface of her fictional worlds, however, readers can observe her characters competing fiercely for desirable partners, questing aggressively for status and resources, and plotting ruthlessly to advance their relatives’ status in life.7

There is even a homologous link with the Iliad’s back-story, but with an ironic twist, for in Wharton’s Olympian social ethos, it is the women who typically compete for the approval of a relatively limited number of suitable mates. Factor in the despotic power of the Gotham clans, conspicuous consumption as the criterion for personal fulfillment, and the timeless clash between male and female reproductive strategies—which guarantees that many of Wharton’s female characters will become mistresses—and you have a formula for what Saunders describes as “much personal unhappiness located in norms whose function is to support evolved adaptations and behavioral strategies, but whose operations exact a high psychological or social price.” (p. 188).

An example from Wharton’s The Age of Innocence (D. Appleton, 1920) will illustrate the power of Saunders’ well-crafted arguments: the adaptive logic of Ellen’s decision to sacrifice her adulterous love for Newland Archer. By reading through a Darwinian lens, Saunders shows that Ellen’s decision is neither as altruistic as readers might suppose, nor as much of a concession to the patriarchal establishment as literary scholars might suppose. At the level of what Joseph Carroll calls “the deep structure of literary representations”—in other words, the structure of elemental, species-typical motives and dispositions that lurk beneath the surface of a text—it is much more like Sophie’s choice.8

Like Newland, Ellen wants a new life of sexual and emotional fulfillment, but these are classically proximate motives generated by a human emotional system designed to promote reproductive success. More importantly, her biological clock has been ticking for a long time, and although she cannot bear the high social costs of mate-poaching could be worth the gamble—or at least they would be if May were not a kinswoman. However, since May is her cousin, “Ellen is pulled in diametrically opposite directions by the operations of two powerful sets of evolutionary forces—the impulse to compete for the best available mate and thus enhance direct fitness, and the nepotistic impulse to assist kin (and thus enhance indirect fitness).”9

Unlike Sophie’s choice, however, this is a prisoner’s dilemma that can be resolved at the level of biological self-interest (although not without exacting, as Saunders says, a “high psychological price”). May’s announcement of her pregnancy is obviously a powerful incentive for Archer to give up his romance with Ellen and return to the fold. But there is an equally important flip side for Ellen: it is a dire warning that she had best withdraw a risky bid to maximize her fitness in favor of a smaller, but safer, investment in her genetic posterity.

Another salient feature of Saunders’ book is the way she generously interweaves quotations from postmodern Wharton scholarship so that “readers can see how biocultural interactions extend, refutes, enriches, or reconfigures insights derived from other critical perspectives.”10 What she implies, and as the quotations themselves confirm, is that postmodern Wharton critics have achieved their best insights not by virtue of their critical methodology, but by reading through the simple Darwinian lens with which evolution has equipped us—the intuitive folk psychology that bonds them much more viscerally to the text and its author than to any school of current literary theory. Since folk psychology is merely the vernacular equivalent of evolutionary psychology, how much better if such insights could be married to a theory that refines them, amplifies them, and brings them into alignment with the best scientific thinking about human nature?

And that is the central thesis of the superb new anthology Literature, Film, Evolution: A Reader (Columbia University Press, 2010), edited by three of Literary Darwinism’s most formative thinkers—Brian Boyd, Joseph Carroll, and Jonathan Gottschall. With thirty-eight well-chosen selections ranging from seminal evolutionary thinking to cutting-edge biosocial criticism of literature and film, the book offers a thorough introduction to the theory and practice of Literary Darwinism. Besides the editors’ own significant contributions to the volume, the contributions by other major scholars such as Michelle Sugiyama, Marcus Nordlund, Ellen Dissanayake, and Daniel Nettle provide a field guide to some of Literary Darwinism’s best thinking.

The book includes some sharp criticism—as it must—of current literary theory. However, the invitation it extends to the profession could not be more genial, open handed, and exciting: If the impulses behind this anthology were to become active across the humanities, this would constitute an epistemic revolution expanding the scope of both the sciences and the humanities [...]. We have no illusions that our formulations are fixed and final, but we have felt the excitement of making new discoveries and look forward to more. We have all been inspired by the exhilarating sense that we are joining together in an intellectual adventure of great scope. We invite you to join us.11

The five-part ground plan resembles a tree of knowledge: Foundationsal scientific texts serve as the roots, evolutionary theories of the origin and function of the arts are the trunk, models of applied Darwinian literary theory stand as the branches, and explications of specific works are the leaves. At the very top, some promising new growth reflects an even sharper convergence of the methods of science and those of the humanities.

In the essay with the most far-reaching implications, Joseph Carroll and his research associates display the findings of an exhaustive statistical study of reader responses to canonical British novels. The study concludes that the novels depict a cooperative social ethos resembling that of early societies of hunters and gatherers, wherein the protagonists are...

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8 Saunders, Reading Edith Wharton, p. 94.

9 Saunders, Reading Edith Wharton, p. 3.


(continued next page)
definition by their behavioral inclination to promote the ethos, and the antagonists by their inclination to sabotage it. Besides providing a wholly new take on this body of literature, this should come as good news to those who still believe that Darwinism concerns itself only with the “survival of the fittest”—in the crude sense famously associated with Social Darwinism—and consequently, that Literary Darwinism must be a safe haven for neoconservative thinking. Actually, though Literary Darwinists cluster more toward the political center than most current literary theorists, Literary Darwinism is apolitical and accommodates scholars from across the entire political spectrum.

Some twelve years ago, Nancy Easterlin, one of the original champions of Literary Darwinism, declared that “Humanists and social scientists, including literary theorists, who ignore the implications of evolutionary theory and biology do so at the cost of the increasing irrelevance of their disciplines.” While such an assertion might have seemed cavalier at the time, in light of recent publications such as those discussed, it seems more prophetic now.

What? Through the magic of vicarious experience, reading fiction is actually good for us? A traditional humanist hardly could have made the point more forcefully. Thus, it should be evident, if it is not already, that Literary Darwinists share much common ground and common cause with traditional humanists, and eagerly hope that many will accept the open invitation to join forces.

By unleashing our reactions to potential lives and realities, fiction enables us to feel more richly and adaptively about what we have not actually experienced. This allows us not only to understand others’ choices and inner lives better, but to feel our way more foresightedly to better adaptive choices ourselves.

I have long felt that I would rather warm up from winter cold than cool down from summer heat. There’s something excitingly elemental about coming in from frigid weather, kindling a fire, maybe taking some tea or a dram. To get warm is to best bitter elements. It takes work, unlike passively cooling off.

At times in my reading life, I want winter. My mind’s weather turns chill, and I seek a corroboration, a correspondence with some other cold front, some frost drama of a poem of winter, in which winter is a season as well as a spiritual condition, outward climate reflecting inner.

The six poems I consider here are works I have read again and again for years, in a wintry frame of mind and out of it, with mixtures of exaltation, surprise, solace, and fear. Each for me passes Robert Graves’ test for true poetry—it raises the neck hair. And Emily Dickinson’s: “If I read a book and it makes my whole body so cold no fire can warm me I know that is poetry.”

My disordered poetic sensibility insists on yoking these six poems in a way that of course their authors—Ted Hughes, Wang Wei, Thomas Hardy, Robert Lowell, Graves and Dickinson—never signed up for. But I hope to describe a progression of recognitions in these poems, a progression involving a bracing tension between harsh reality and heartening strength, by way of comparing elements in them. A way of warming up, I like to think. Maybe something more, something glimpsed in mists of the inexpressible.

Charles Duncan is a professor of English at Clark Atlanta University.

COLD COMFORT: SIX POEMS IN WINTER

By Brian J. Buchanan

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“February,” Ted Hughes

Hughes was famous, and oft criticized, for being primarily a poet of primitive, bloody nature and, more precisely, of animals, which he loved. In his verse, he worked to get at the essence of animals, often while expressing a view of nature as being hostile and indifferent to human knowledge and kind to itself. But this preamble fails to prepare us for the force of “February.”

This poem embodies—or disembodies—the wolf at the door. Of traditional, tamed images and effigies of wolves, says the first of six unyielding, free-verse quatrains: “none suffice.” A photograph has overwhelmed the poet, or a “him” we might take to be the poet:

the hairless, knuckled feet
Of the last wolf killed in Britain.

The image frightens him far more than any other thought of wolves, so much so that, entering his dreams,

...these feet
Print the moonlit doorstep,
or run and run
Through the husk of parkland, baldless, headless....

The wolf’s feet “siege...to all thought,” (12) pulling the poem’s “him” not just into obsession, but a non-human world, a wolf world of an anguished, spectral hunt. The last dead wolf, quartered by some hunter, now roams disembodied in search of his slaughtered self, his lost world:

(continued next page)
As terrifying as this is, there’s more to it. The speaker mediates, none too sympathetically, “mouths clamped well onto the world,” suggests that human spokesman. That his masks are many, their only to conceal himself but also to appear as a wolf. Wild British wolves—he works urgently in his verse not making wolf masks. Head for a replacement H stanzas. But think of it: The “him” of the poem—like our breaking up the rush at our jugulars of its last two H ere the poem ends, and I imagine the speaker’s reticence regarding his whereabouts can be taken several ways. We can read the poem as a sympathetic acknowledgment—though without remorse—the speaker’s naive insensitivity in his host’s unexpected absence. The poem may be saying, Welcome to my world. This is what life is like for me. Or the refusal to explain anything can be viewed as an insult. Then again, the poem may simply be a statement of fact concerning our ultimate aloneness in nature. Friends disappear. The official world of politics and administration confronts overpowering, void nature, into which the speaker vanishes.

The final two lines about the gibbon howls and the temple bell, however, introduce sound into the silence. The savage cries of the animals contrast with the distant ringing from a temple. Wang Wei was a devout Buddhist, and in the temple bell we hear at least the prospect of comfort, in humanity and even spirituality. Still, from the point of view of the secretary and the reader, such comforts lie far away: gibbons, which can be fierce creatures, may stand between us and the temple, and given the cold, deserted vastness that confronts us, the sound of the bell offers little solace.

As terrifying as this is, there’s more to it. For in making masks of wolves—under the horror of the extinction of wild British wolves—he works urgently in his verse not only to conceal himself but also to appear as a wolf. The disinheritance beast has found a crowning yet intense human spokesman. That his masks are many, their “mouths clamped well onto the world,” suggests that he does not merely pose as a wolf—he takes it out of us. The speaker mediates, none too sympathetically, betwixt a furious wolf and its own self. For him, the mask making is a desperate refuge, hardly a solace. And it provides no defense for us as readers. The vanished wolf has loped into our innermost being and has gotten us after all.

Is there any comfort, any redemption to be found in this wolf-extinguished winter? None that I can find. To survive nature’s eventual, inevitable rage, the man must become as a wolf. That he does so through masks of poetry leaves us in wintry terror. As A. Alvarez wrote, Ted Hughes’ poetry “is adequate to the destructive reality we inhabit.” “February” is the winter of our disinheritance of nature, and the frightening consequences it portends. A bitter forecast it is.

“The Darkling Thrush,” Thomas Hardy

Hardy’s was a predominately wintry mind. Unable to accept religious faith, though he mourned its absence, he also tended to look upon transformative, Wordsworthian blazes of imagination with doubt. “But moving within the distrust of imagination,” David Perkins wrote in 1959, “there is also the questioning, tentative openness of Hardy.”

That “tentative openness” of the divided soul that was Hardy’s can be seen in “The Darkling Thrush.” In this poem, writes Claire Tomalin, Hardy “manages a perfect balance between his unbelief and his nostalgia for the faith in which he had been reared.”

The poem, published in 1900, presents three elements: a speaker, winter; and a bird. It is a winter of miserable, desolate exhaustion, made more deathly by dusk, “[t]he weakening eye of day.” The landscape’s music appears ruined.

“Where are the ages of gold and the singing streams / The sunny fields, and the pageants of the sky?” (1-2) But suddenly the thrush announces himself: In the third stanza of four-three-four meter and regular abacab rhyme, he sings. The lines cannot be quoted too often:

At once a voice arose among The bleak twigs overhead In a full-hearted evensong Of joy illimitéd; An aged thrush, frail, gaunt, and small, In blast-beruffled plume, Had chosen thus to fling his soul Upon the growing gloom.

But I find these among the most thrilling verses in English, lines to be shouted into the teeth of a blizzard. “Blust-beruffled plume” rouses the poetic nerves. I take profound courage from the song of the bird’s full heart, from the image of a frail old bird giving his stalling answer to winter. The bird’s answer is not just defiance, but cheerful defiance. Hardy is impressed enough to have rendered the thrush and his song in such monumental poetry, yet his speaker cannot participate fully in the bird’s joy.

(continued next page)

“Christmas Eve Under Hooker’s Statue,” Robert Lowell

This poem appears in Lowell’s second book, Lord Weary’s Castle. Brooding during a World War II blackout, the poet thinks of childhood and Christmas, and casts a baleful eye at the image of Hooker, a Civil War general, whose statue is taken to be a symbol of war. In three nine-line stanzas of abab rhyming ending in a rhyming couplet (stanzas two’s rhyme scheme is a bit irregular), the poem harnesses the cold, sterile warrior to the idea of blighted innocence, of original sin: “hell’s / Serpent entwined in the apple in the toe of the speaker” (19). The speaker’s childhood Christmas stocking “[to stink the child with knowledge.”

Hooker and his machinery of combat represent the force under which “[the long horn of plenty broke like glass; / (8); it is a wintry force, this ‘blundering butcher’ (16), his ‘heels / Kicking at nothing in the shifting snow’ (4–5). We feel the chill of frigid metal: “His heavy saber flashes with the rime” (12). The poem then likens the “Man of war” (20) to the speaker’s father, the Christmas-stocking theme returns. “I am cold” (17), the speaker says:

i ask for bread, my father gives me mould
His stocking is full of stones. Santa in red
is crowned with wizened berries. (18–20)

The childhood ideal of Santa’s kingship and gift-giving power is withered by time. It is tempting here to read an additional function of poetry is religious invocation of the Muse,” 10

But we are old, our fields are running wild: Till Christ again turn wanderer and child. (26–27)

The ending puts forth a hope for redemption in this winter of sin and loss—a return of Jesus, a new Christmas, a restored Christ-child. His itinerary ministry of salvation, His welcoming of children and exhortation to all to become like little children. This winter hope seems miraculous, more than the birdsong of hope of which Hardy’s speaker is unaware, or the faraway dirg of a temple bell in Wang Wei’s poem, or a desperately seem wolf-mask in Hughes’. Lowell’s line is prophetic, with a touch of Yeats in it, and like true

Stirring suddenly from long hibernation, I knew myself once more a poet...”

10 “Hardy and the Poetry of Isolation,” in Hardy, p. 154.

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Upon this waking, the poet finds himself
Guarded by timeless principalities
Against the worm of death, this hideous haunting... (3–4)

This last phrase suggests Keats’s “La Belle Dame Sans Merci,” in which the speaker meets “a faery’s child,” loves her, places her on his heed, hears “her faery’s song,” believes himself loved, and falls asleep in her "elfin grot," only to wake alone "[o]n the cold hill’s side" after the "hornid warning" of a dream. 16

In Graves’ poetic mythology, “La Belle Dame Sans Merci” suggests abandonment by the Muse and resulting desolation. Yet, unlike the narrator of Keats’ ballad, Graves’ mid-winter poet finds in his lover... suddan warm airs that blow
Before the expected season of new blossom, While sheep still gnaw at roots and lambless go—

It is still winter, but now the poet feels the breath of spring, ahead of schedule, with the prospect of new verse symbolized by or arising from spring. He awakes to find

...her hand in mine laid closely
Who shall watch out the Spring with me.
We stared in silence all around us
But found no winter anywhere to see

(12–15)

Here the poem ends. Though tough winter remains, it has vanished for the lover. They have undergone a magical transformation that leaves them—and us—hushed in wonder. In this poem, love possesses the power to nullify winter even with the season just half-over. It proclaims love as a way out of the spiritual winter within which the speakers or characters in the other poems exist and against which they contend.

(continued next page)
Poem No. 442—“God made a little Gentian,”
Emily Dickinson

In Thomas H. Johnson’s edition, the poem begins

God made a little gentian—
It tried—to be a Rose—
And failed—and all the Summer laughed—a;
“T’was the Frosts were her condition” (9), the final stanza says, the flower failing to reach its full glory “(u)ntil the North—invoke it” (11). The poem ends with, “Shall I—blooom?” (12).

Then, “just before the Snows” (4), a “Purple Creature” (5) grew “[t]hat ravished all the Hill” (6) and all ridicule ceased. “The Frosts were her condition” (9), the final stanza says, the flower failing to reach its full glory “(u)ntil the North—invoke it” (11). The poem ends with, “Shall I—blooom?” (12).

The first possible reading of this poem takes the gentian as botanical specimen. Strictly on the level of botanical drama, an analysis of the poem might go like this: A lesser fringed gentian, which can appear as early as June, or a closed gentian, which would wait until August, bloomed but was greatly outshone by roses and other larger, showier flowers (note how the dash in “It tried—to be a Rose” accentuates both the flower’s effort and the rose it failed to become). Along came autumn, though, and then the fringed gentian—the “Purple Creature,” which can bloom as late as November—carried the day rose it failed to become). Along came autumn, though, and then the fringed gentian—the “Purple Creature,” which can bloom as late as November—carried the day.

No doubt for many readers, the “I” of Dickinson is a person. “I” is not a metaphor, nor a personification, but a person. But Dickinson herself warned against such readings, spinning in a letter the assumption that the “I” of her poems was herself. “It does not mean—me—but a supposed person.”

Granting that, we may say nonetheless that the flower speaks for the “I” of the poem, at least who feels she has not bloomed, and seems timidly to ask whether she might. She has simply failed to be a rose, which we may read as trying and failing at love, and hears the ridicule of society at the winter of her seclusion. And yet, this winter, unlike those in the other poems explored in this essay, proves to be neither an adversary nor a hostile condition for the gentian but, to the contrary, the gentian’s vertebrate Muse—“The Frosts were her condition,” the very “North” of winter bringing out her beauty, discounterencing the rest of flower society. The abrupt breaking away from the tale of the gentian by the “I” suggests potential identification with the flower in spite of the implied declaration of separateness. The nursery-tale diction in the treatment of the dismissive flower world also works well to distance both the gentian and the “I” from it.

What we know about Dickinson still nags at us, though, as we read this poem. Allen Tate called her a poet of “personal revelation,” and counted her artistry as “the effort of the individual to live apart from a cultural tradition that no longer sustains her.” But what is revealed in Dickinson’s poetry, and what is the nature of the living apart? Consider this: Northrop Frye reported that after the Reverend Charles Wadsworth, whom Dickinson appeared to have loved, took a church in San Francisco called Calvary, she styled herself “Empress of Calvary,” the distant church becoming “the center of a drama of loss and renunciation.” We see the loss in “Gentian,” but the renunciation is less obvious until we think of how winter functions in the poem. Winter is the gentian’s triumphant element that simultaneously humbles the summer flowers and brings the gentian to bloom. This winter, this renunciation, this “Nothing,” as Dickinson wrote elsewhere, “is the force / That renovates the world.” As Howard says, Dickinson’s poems “are just that renovation, the negative force which made life accessible to her.”

In this poem, winter serves as that negative force, the paradoxical “condition” of triumph after loss. Winter summons a life different from that of the rest of the world. The “I” leaves off wondering whether she can, and asking whether she shall, flourish in that life and blaze out in glory amid her wintry solitude.

Final thoughts

These six poems present a range of exploits and outcomes—from chill horror in Hughes and Wang Wei, to uncertain hope of redemption in Hardy and Lowell, to the magical salvation of love in Graves, and finally, and perhaps most magnificently, to an affirmation of winter itself as a potential garden in Dickinson. In their different ways, they open us to awe, thrills, revelatory, contradictory, often ambiguous ways of looking at winter, which represents adversity and spiritual crisis.

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16 Allen Tate, “Emily Dickinson,” in Essays of Four Decades (Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 1999), page 292.
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