

Letters

THE SEMIANNUAL NEWSLETTER OF THE ROBERT PENN WARREN CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES

So VOL. 3, NO. 2 • SPRING 1995 • VANDERBILT UNIVERSITY

Visual Representation and Material Culture in the Early Modern Period

The Early Modern Studies Group, an interdisciplinary faculty seminar, has been meeting regularly for several years under the auspices of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities. Approximately fifteen faculty members representing seven academic disciplines are participants in the program. The seminar, coordinated this year by Professor William Engel of the English Department, is exploring the theme "Visual Representation and Material Culture." Along with Professor Engel, *Letters* recently conducted an interview with group participants Professors Valerie Traub (Department of English) and Joyce Chaplin (Department of History) concerning the nature of this interdisciplinary group and how their individual work relates to this year's focal topic.

LETTERS: To begin, what is the early modern period? Particularly, how is it distinct from the Renaissance, and how is this distinction important?

CHAPLIN: As an historian, I guess I should start by setting the historical parameters. I think the most agreed upon dates would be roughly 1400 to 1800. However, many people would still want to talk about a smaller interval within that period. This interval is commonly referred to as the Renaissance, which is contained somewhere within the early modern period, but describes a particular high-culture movement and not necessarily a period of overarching history.

TRAUB: Actually, I think literary scholars, particularly feminist literary critics, have been influ-



William E. Engel, Assistant Professor of English, Joyce E. Chaplin, Associate Professor of History, and Valerie Traub, Associate Professor of English, participants in the Early Modern Studies Group

enced by historians in this regard because of an essay that was written by the historian Joan Kelly-Gadol, "Did Women Have a Renaissance?" Simply posing such a question brought into focus some of the gendered asymmetries in the experience of people in western Europe during the time we typically call the Renaissance. Many feminist scholars agree with her general argument that women did not have a Renaissance. During this period, there was a flowering of the humanities, an invigoration of culture through the rediscovery of classical texts, and the introduction of a patronage system. All of these activities contributed to an explosion of high culture—but

women, for the most part, were not included within such activities. In fact, many women, in terms of legal and political rights, became more subordinated as patriarchal relations continued to solidify over the course of the 17th century.

ENGEL: In the same way, the term "Renaissance," functioning as an historical period, tends to exclude all kinds of other groups and ways of thinking that were vitally present in Europe at that time. For example, it leaves out what was happening in Moorish culture and in Judaic culture. The idea of the Renaissance, as we inherited it from the 19th century, presents the illusion of a totalizing structure and a kind of objec-

tive truth about this period—a truth that can be attained. I think in the 20th century we can use "early modern" as a way to situate what we are moving toward, not

Contents

Visual Representation and
Material Culture in the Early
Modern Period 1

Gender and Theoretical
Thinking 5

Center Establishes Permanent
Endowment 6

*The South as an American
Problem* 7

Spring 1995 Seminars 8

ENGEL:

I think in the 20th century we can use “early modern” as a way to situate what we are moving toward, not so much as an idea of “progression,” but as a space for “continuation.”

so much as an idea of “progression,” but as a space for “continuation.”

CHAPLIN: It is clear, however, that when we speak of the early modern period, we are talking about a period that is obviously not the Middle Ages, nor is it yet the modern era like that after the French Revolution. In this way, the term “early modern” carries an “us/not us” meaning: the people in this era seem like us, like people who have been shaped by the modern era, yet they are not quite like us, not yet—hence the designation “early modern.”

ENGEL: I think that is exactly right.

TRAUB: And by using a term like “early modern,” we recognize that categories like the “Renaissance” are creations of a much later period that looks back to other periods, not just retrospectively, but nostalgically. We are trying to call into question the process by which such categories got constructed in the first place.

CHAPLIN: In fact, it is interesting to note that, far from being an artificially constructed category, the term “modern” was used during the period we call “early modern.” It was derived from the Latin word *hodie*, meaning day. *Hodiern* meant daily, up to date, the way we live now; it is from *bodiern* that the English got the word “modern” by the early 1500s. Although the meaning and use of the term are more consistent today, earlier it would have been used very loosely as a way to signify some distance from the medieval social order.

LETTERS: Given everything that has been said, it would seem as though the Early Modern Studies Group functions within this distinction between “early modern” and “Renaissance” and falls more to the side of refiguring our understanding of the early modern period according to the exclusions that you have identified with the Renaissance.

TRAUB: That is correct. Although it is important to say that not every member of the group

would be willing to forego the term “Renaissance” or would necessarily agree with our characterization of how periodization works. But I think that there are some productive intellectual tensions within the group about the meanings of these concepts.

LETTERS: So this distinction still produces some tension between members in the group?

ENGEL: In general, we do not argue this categorical distinction.

TRAUB: We are basically inclusive in order to create more opportunities for discussion.

CHAPLIN: I think for a long time there has been a sense that using “early modern” is the most inclusive strategy. It is enough of a signal to the people who work on the high Renaissance that it speaks to them somehow. As a result, this distinction does not so much produce disagreements as it does differences among the members of the group about which term they are most comfortable with. More importantly, I think individuals might have their own internal disciplinary quarrels with these terms as applied to their own work.

LETTERS: This year’s focal topic for the Early Modern Studies Group is “Visual Representation and Material Culture.” What in the study of visual representation and material culture goes to advancing and/or refiguring our understanding of the early modern period? Particularly, what is the character and importance of the relationship between visual representation and material culture?

CHAPLIN: When historians talk about the early modern period in relation to material culture, they have in mind certain economic and social relationships. According to historians, that is what defines people and

their actions in this era and determines how they see things or each other. I would think for people in the field of literature there must be an assumption about subjectivity that would be much more the operative category for what you are talking about, which may speak to this question about seeing and creating visual representation.

ENGEL: In addition to subjectivity’s relation to visual representation, there is also the increasingly important idea that the text is a material artifact produced under certain social and, quite literally, material conditions.

We are not satisfied to read the finished artifact or text simply for content. We are also very interested in exploring several “marginal” elements: who the audience was, what the border illustrations are, who had these print blocks, if the print blocks circulated from one print shop to another, and so on. We would then want to ask what this tells us about how these images and words got into the minds of the readership and in turn got translated in the world. In short, what are the social practices that result from these texts circulating in the ways they did? So in addition to certain assumptions about subjectivity, I think it is important that we no longer just take a text at face value.

TRAUB: Part of the impulse for this year’s topic came from an interest that Bill and I share. For a long time, Bill has worked on the borderlines between visual representation and textual production, because he works on textual emblems that include both pictures or images and poems or epigrams. In my recent research, I have begun to work with illustrations in anatomy books and paintings from the “high arts” tradition. I was feeling a sense of illegitimacy because it seemed as

though I was moving into another disciplinary domain, whether that of science or fine arts, and wanted to explore what it was that I was doing as a professor of English making claims about these other kinds of texts, these other kinds of artifacts. Because of the interdisciplinary character of the relation between visual representation and material culture, this year’s topic seemed like a convenient way to pull together people who were working in all sorts of disciplines, including those in the department of Fine Arts and the Blair School of Music. So, again, we were partly motivated by a desire to be inclusive. At the same time, this group provides the opportunity for individuals to indulge their personal interests in an interdisciplinary manner. What I am interested in this group doing—which may not be the same for other people at all—is to try to figure out what interdisciplinary work is and which kinds of skills it requires. I am very well trained in particular modes of reading a text, but I want to explore how other people from other disciplines both read a text I am very familiar with, and how they read one from their own discipline.

ENGEL: By highlighting these sorts of concerns, we are able to begin to question what counts as knowledge in the different disciplines and, more importantly, in our own discipline. More specifically, we are able to develop more effective questions as to who defines and describes what is the proper subject or object of knowledge in any particular discipline represented in the Early Modern Studies Group.

LETTERS: This year’s topic, then, is meant to engage the interdisciplinary character of the group?

TRAUB: Yes, this is because there has been a significant movement in early modern studies toward cultural studies; and if you are doing cultural studies, there is a way in which you have to be interdisciplinary. Recently, I have



TRAUB:

There is a strange sense of resemblance between the early modern and the postmodern . . . for instance, the discourses about sexuality in the early modern period are similar to certain discourses of sexuality now emerging as postmodern. In both moments, sexuality is conceived as something that exceeds the prevailing categories of identity.

felt the need to move my work in a much more historical direction. The question, then, becomes whether I am posing as an historian, or working as a literary scholar with an interest in history. And if I choose the latter, what is the kind of history that I construct as a literary scholar? Am I just doing history badly? One of the most troublesome issues related to this has to do with historical terms of evidence and proof. What I take to be evidence or proof may not be the same as somebody who has been trained in social history. But this is a problem only because I would like historians to read my work and say, "Yes, she is right." I feel that I am doing important work on representations of female/female relationships; but part of me wishes that the social historians, who have the professional training, were doing it. I continue to be haunted by a fear that I have no right to be doing this work and certainly little skill.

CHAPLIN: That is the terrible tension of such work. You want to be validated—

TRAUB: By the other discipline—

CHAPLIN: When you encroach on the other discipline. At the same time, you also want to be able to tell them something that perhaps they would not have already known. This is exactly the difficulty of interdisciplinary work: to establish terms in which you are able to do both tasks.

ENGEL: There is a parallel way in which much of my understanding is shaped by the discipline that is now called dialectical anthropology, because I concur with the view developed by J. Fabian in *Time and the Other*. But I would never be mistaken for a real anthropologist for one reason: because I am not working with existing social groups on rites and rituals. However, many of the same principles that anthropologists have used in examining a social group or collective of men and women are precisely what I strive to apply to the Re-

naissance. I am especially interested in reconstructing as nearly as I can what I term, building on the work of Joel Altman, the Elizabethan "mind at play." That is, how different aspects of our wit or rhetorical tropes would have been used, thought about, or expressed. One does not get at that except by looking at the visible, extant traces of how a community organized itself and reflected on that organization.

CHAPLIN: I wonder, considering the kinds of interdisciplinary work that we have done, whether we are not actually talking about a fairly small number of disciplines that we consider appropriate, either the ones that were originally used to define the Renaissance, like art history, or others, like psychoanalysis and anthropology, that have been used more recently to define modernity and the modern age. I am trying to think of a discipline that would be so different it would be the real test as to whether we are doing something new and interesting to the early modern period. Perhaps it would be archaeology, since this discipline was not as deeply involved with defining this period. I just wonder if in our attempt to break outside of disciplinary boundaries we are not going far enough.

LETTERS: Even though you have already begun to speak to this question, how do each of you perceive that your work fits into the interdisciplinary work of the Early Modern Studies Group?

TRAUB: Currently, I am writing a book on the discourses of female erotic pleasure in the early modern period, primarily focused in England, but also using some texts from Germany, France, and Italy. I am particularly interested in analyzing the kinds of discourse that may have either constrained or enabled such pleasure. For instance, part of the book is

about the evolution and construction of the definitions of deviant sexuality during the 17th century. In the Renaissance, there was not a category of the heterosexual or the homosexual. There were other allied categories: the sodomite or the tribade, but they do not neatly map onto those categories that are operative today.

Mine is an interdisciplinary kind of work insofar as I am looking at various kinds of texts from stage plays to anatomy books, to travel narratives, to various kinds of visual representations, and even an opera. Opera, in fact, is where I find my own training to be most lacking. Obviously, I can read the libretto in poetic or narrative terms. What to do with the music, how to hear it, however, is completely foreign to me and a real challenge.

The fact that my work is interdisciplinary in the ways that we have been describing is how it fits into the group. The way that it may not fit very comfortably is that it is motivated by a very political agenda: I am trying to reclaim a category of experience for women's erotic pleasure in a period that has historically denied it to them; and, at the same time, to meditate theoretically the difficulties of this reclamation.

At any rate, I am not sure that everyone in the group feels particularly comfortable with lesbian history or queer theory; but I am interested in exposing people to that kind of scholarship as well as in getting their reactions as to how it should be done.

CHAPLIN: I am working on a topic that is both history and history of science, which is not a discipline that we have represented very well in the group. I am looking at the very earliest period of British colonization in America and examining the ques-

tion of difference, or possible difference, between the cultures that encountered each other in the new world. I am focusing mostly on the British in North America and looking at the question of whether the contrast between a scientific western way of viewing the world was immediately apparent in comparing the British to the Native Americans, or whether, in fact, this was a constructed self that the British manufactured over the course of the encounter in order to differentiate themselves from the natives for the purpose of creating an imperial program or ideology. This construction may have also been used to buttress cultural claims that would have been important more for the old world itself in terms of elevating the British into a species of scientific Europeans; so there was cultural manufacturing going on both in the old world and in the new. Right now, I am looking at the 16th century and the very first English accounts of what they saw in America and points of similarity or difference they perceived between their view of the material world and Native American views of the material world and technology.

ENGEL: I have just finished a book in which I opened up new ways of questioning what might be meant by early modern consciousness through a study of memory and mnemonic devices. I tried to get at such a notion of consciousness by looking at various memory treatises, at plans for developing the mind, and at various ways that language was being used and literally conflated with images in the mind's eye or in the theatre of the imagination.

That project got me interested in my current work on the places where words and images merge, mesh, and interact. I am thinking particularly about the word for death in Latin, *mors*. This word, so to speak, becomes a character in renaissance plays, and in certain treatises it was a homonym for the word for African Moors, the alien culture that was knock-



CHAPLIN:

When historians talk about the early modern period in relation to material culture, they have in mind certain economic and social relationships. According to historians, that is what defines people and their actions in this era and determines how they see things or each other.

ing at the gates of Europe and to some extent already very much inside it. In some almanacs and on a few maps, I have even found places where the iconography for Moors is confused with that of Death. That led me to start looking at the figure of the Moor and how it functioned in heraldry. For instance, it is interesting to note how a Moor's head, the decapitated head of a Moor, would be used to stand for somebody whose name was Morrison, Moor's son, but who had nothing to do with being a Moor or even with killing them in the Crusades. So I am trying to trace and track different ways that words and images were wittingly and wittily confused or punned. Contrary to what I originally thought, there are many, many places where this occurs.

LETTERS: It sounds as though each of your projects raises intriguing questions about many of the interesting issues involved in the interdisciplinary study of the early modern period, but how, in the end, do each of you conceive of the importance of refiguring and furthering our understanding of the early modern period in these ways?

CHAPLIN: I think there is a long-term quarrel with modernity—about its limits—of which studies of the early modern period would be a part. This debate is carried out in terms of defining ourselves as ambivalent toward a modern age and looking at the early ambivalence that may have been embedded in the concept of the modern during the very time when people had a conception of themselves as living in a new and different age.

In fact, in relation to this question, I have a question of my own that I would like to put to you, the literary scholars. When did the term “early modern” enter your field, and was its entry facilitated by the familiarity with the term “postmodern” that many of you were using to define the termination of the modern period?

ENGEL: The term “early modern” came into its own about the same time as Stephen Greenblatt's use of the term “new historicism.”

TRAUB: Joyce's question is really interesting to me; I think she is right to ask it. If the postmodern marks the exhaustion of modernity, the early modern marks the moment when we begin to see the issues of modernity emerging. This is not to say that there was a full-blown Enlightenment subject apparent in the 16th century—nor that there was nothing recognizably “modern” in the medieval subject.

Rather, the two periods are similar precisely because of their transitional status. There is a strange sense of resemblance between the early modern and the postmodern, especially in certain discursive domains having to do with subjectivity; for instance, the discourses about sexuality in the early modern period are similar to certain discourses of sexuality now emerging as postmodern. In both moments, sexuality is conceived as something that exceeds the prevailing categories of identity.

CHAPLIN: But historians would want to maintain that the early modern era had a historical or contextual integrity of its own. It may seem similar to a postmodern culture, but focusing only on this similarity will distort our understanding of the past.

TRAUB: Yes, I agree that there are substantial differences, particularly in terms of economic and political organization. However, if one is thinking locally rather than globally, one can see that within certain sectors of experience and representation, there are interesting points of comparison. The point is to ask, why the resemblance in this domain and

not another? Examining such points of intersection suggests that the early modern could be an important source of information to the postmodern.

ENGEL: We can highlight this with certain features of textual style, primarily the idea of a text being finished. It was alien to writers like Montaigne and

Burton who spent their whole lives revising and refiguring what it is they said before. In the same vein, I am always amused when people say, “What Montaigne means in this essay is X,” when my readings of Montaigne try to point out that any one text can be, at the same

time, a serious excursus, a satire, and a translation from an early writer. Why is it that we cannot have these many voices in play at once? My work attempts to show that we can. As a result, some of the things people, like Lyotard, would identify as elements of the postmodern condition we can see at work as a literary practice in what we are now calling the early modern period.

CHAPLIN: That is a very interesting point. However, historians not only emphasize the political and economic forms that make each historical period distinctive, but also the particular mental constructs that ordered cultural and intellectual life. In this regard, I would probably not go as far to say that there is something essentially different about the early modern period, something that makes it unique when compared to other eras, but we should recognize that something may be lost if we attempt to interpret past eras only in terms of similarity to ourselves. Here again we come up against the “us/not us” schema that may conceal as much as it reveals. By using ourselves as the measure of the early

modern period, we may be missing some different and equally interesting points about this historical era.



JOYCE E. CHAPLIN is an associate professor in the Department of History. Her first book, *An Anxious Pursuit: Agricultural Innovation and Modernity in the Lower South, 1730-1815* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1993), examined the end of the early modern era and the emergence of modernity in plantation regions of North America. Her current work looks at English colonization of America at the very start of the early modern period. She teaches courses on the history of early America.

WILLIAM E. ENGEL is an assistant professor in the Department of English. He is the author of *Mapping Morality: The Persistence of Memory and Melancholy in Early Modern England* (Amherst: UMASS Press, 1995), and is currently finishing a book-length study of Renaissance depictions of the tacit, the silent, and the unvoiced, *Toward A Poetic History of Wind*. In addition to coordinating the Early Modern Studies Group, he teaches courses on the discourses of knowledge in the Renaissance and on Shakespeare.

VALERIE TRAUB is an associate professor in the Department of English. She is the author of *Desire and Anxiety: Circulations of Sexuality in Shakespearean Drama* (New York: Routledge, 1992). She is completing a book on discourses of female erotic pleasure in early modern England, from which she has published several articles on representations of “lesbians.” She teaches courses on Shakespeare, Renaissance eroticism, and feminist theory.



Gender and Theoretical Thinking

By Anne Marie Deer Owens and Robert Richardson

Although throughout history one encounters relatively few women who have specialized in such theoretical fields as mathematics, theoretical physics, theology, and philosophy, some of these women made extraordinary contributions to these disciplines, according to Arkady Plotnitsky, the first William S. Vaughn Visiting Fellow to the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities. Professor Plotnitsky is part of the 1994/95 Humanities Center Fellows Program entitled "Science and Society" where he is working on a project concerning the relationships between gender, science, and critical theory. More specifically, he is considering the contributions that particular women have made to theoretical or abstract thinking in mathematics, theoretical physics, literature, philosophy, and psychoanalysis.

Professor Plotnitsky considers his study to be part of the exploration of the questions of gender that have often been excluded from traditional discourse in and about theoretical disciplines. This exclusion may, in turn, result in a failure in understanding how it is that gender contributes to the structure of abstract thinking. "Historically speaking, a much smaller number of women than men have worked in areas customarily associated with abstract thinking. The point of my project," Plotnitsky said, "is to show that there have always been women who were not only working in these areas, but whose contributions were crucial to the development of their fields." He explained further that, in fact, because specific theoretical disciplines contribute to the overall intellectual scene, he wants to investigate how feminism and gender studies help to shape the contemporary politics of feminism. Plotnitsky said, "This project is especially challenging because the relationship between gender studies and theory have been in themselves a complex and

important issue in the last twenty years."

Professor Plotnitsky's work on gender and abstract thinking grows out of his previous work on the relationship between science and critical theory. In previous books, particularly *Complementarity: Anti-Epistemology After Bohr and Derrida* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), he explored the relationship between modern scientific theories, such as quantum physics and post-Gödelian mathematical logic, and new paradigms of philosophical and historical analysis, following the ideas of such figures as Nietzsche, Bataille, Deleuze, and Derrida, and examined their combined effect on traditional philosophical and scientific theories. He is now concerned with the role of women in the development of such "anti-epistemological" theories.

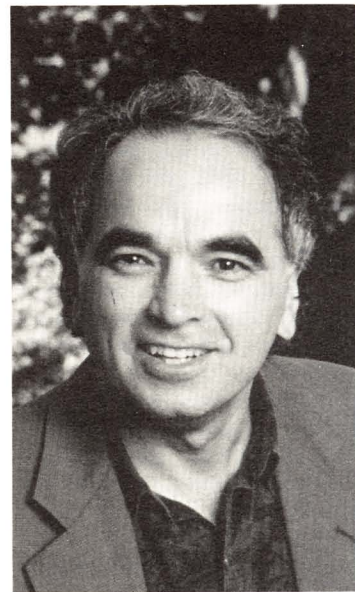
His project focuses on three particular women authors and their contributions to radical theory. The first is Amalie Emmy Noether, a German mathematician who worked in several key areas of abstract mathematics and theoretical physics from 1910 through the 1930s. As Professor Plotnitsky has stated, his work will be "especially concerned with [her] idea of symmetry and with its role in quantum mechanics and relativity. Noether's theorem concerning the relation between invariance and symmetry and conservation laws in physics is both an essential tool of modern theoretical physics and one of the greatest manifestations of the mathematical and philosophical ideas of symmetry." In turn, Plotnitsky wants to show how the idea of symmetry has had a lasting effect on other disciplines besides mathematics and physics, such as philosophy and even literature.

The second figure with whom Professor Plotnitsky is working is Gertrude Stein, a major figure of the modernist artistic movement during the same period. As literary scholars have pointed out,

Stein is responsible for many innovations in literary studies, particularly certain forms of abstract (or formal) experimentation in literature and the arts, on the one hand, and feminist and gender theories, on the other. Plotnitsky, while acknowledging these distinct achievements, is concerned that the connections between them have not been sufficiently explored. His project will pay careful attention to how Stein's earlier studies at Johns Hopkins gave her a unique background in philosophy and science.

Finally, Plotnitsky's study will be concerned with Luce Irigaray, a contemporary French philosopher and theorist of psychoanalysis. Irigaray's case, according to Plotnitsky, is different because from its very inception psychoanalysis has attracted and involved a number of women practitioners and theorists. Plotnitsky will focus on the particular differences between her work and other psychoanalytic theorists in order to show how she has helped to shape contemporary psychoanalytic theory. He will be especially concerned with Irigaray's intellectual relationship with Lacanian analysis, which has interesting connections to modern mathematics and science. From this perspective, Irigaray's work can be productively considered in its relation to other contemporary philosophical and scientific theorists. But, as Plotnitsky noted, "My main focus will remain the question of the abstract and, more generally, the theoretical."

As his previous work and current project indicate, Professor Plotnitsky is deeply interested in the relationship between science, philosophy, literature, and theory. Plotnitsky earned a master's degree in mathematics from the University of Leningrad. According to Plotnitsky, even though he had always been interested in literature and philosophy, it would not have made sense to study the humanities in the former Soviet Union, given the repressive political regime at the time. He said,



Arkady Plotnitsky

"So many key texts were not available. Think about the fact that Freud was never published in the Soviet Union, and most of the twentieth-century philosophy was not printed or discussed." At the time, the University of Leningrad was one of the best schools in the world for the study of science, so he felt fortunate to be able to pursue that field with a specialization in mathematics. "In a sense, I was following the American ideal of a liberal arts education. Part of this ideal is that it sometimes matters less what you study than how and with whom. I had an opportunity to study with some of the leading mathematicians and physicists in the world," he said.

Professor Plotnitsky emigrated to the United States in 1976, during what he called "that first trickle of the last wave of Soviet emigration which started in the early to mid-seventies." When Plotnitsky first arrived in the United States, he did not plan to pursue an academic career, having accepted a position as a computer programmer at a bank in Philadelphia. However, he had maintained an interest in literature and literary theory, and stayed in contact with literature

professors from the Soviet Union who had already come to the West. As a result, he enrolled at the University of Pennsylvania and received a doctorate in comparative literature and literary theory in 1982. Since that time, Plotnitsky has remained at Pennsylvania to teach literary theory, the history of English and European romanticism, and Russian literature. In addition, as indicated above, he has carried out re-

search in such areas as the relationship between modern science and radical developments in twentieth-century philosophy and critical theory. Besides his book on Bohr and Derrida, he has published *In the Shadow of Hegel: Complementarity, History and the Unconscious* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993) and *Reconfigurations: Critical Theory and General Economy* (Gainesville: University Press of

Florida, 1993).

Professor Plotnitsky said he is honored to have been invited to spend time at the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities, because it has earned an excellent reputation for the quality of its work. As he said, "I hope to complete a major portion of my study while on campus; however, I anticipate that with the relevance of the theme of this year's Fellows Program to my work and

the excellence of the Center, I will be introduced to many fresh ideas and new and interesting connections that will affect the outcome of my research."

This article is based on an interview written by Anne Marie Deer Owens that originally appeared in the October 17-23, 1994 edition of the Vanderbilt Register.

Center Establishes Permanent Endowment

It is crucial to the life of any academic endeavor that it be able to ensure financial security, and this is no less true for the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities. This year the Center took a decisive step toward ensuring the future of its interdisciplinary programs. With an award from the Arthur Vining Davis Foundations of Jacksonville, Florida, in conjunction with other gifts and pledges received to date, the Warren Center met the requirements for its National Endowment for the Humanities 1-to-4 challenge grant. In turn, the \$480,000 matching grant completes the Center's campaign to establish a \$2.4 million permanent endowment. Although the drive to increase the endowment will continue for several years to come, the completion of the initial campaign secures a role for the Warren Center in the continuing academic vitality of Vanderbilt University.

The Warren Center, established in 1988, provides unique opportunities for focused and sustained academic explorations that cross disciplinary boundaries. One of the Center's central projects is its yearly Fellows Program. The fellows group consists of eight to ten Vanderbilt faculty members who meet weekly throughout the academic year to explore a topic of common research and teaching interest. The 1994/95 Fellows Program, directed by John A. McCarthy (Professor of German) and Arleen M. Tuchman (Associate Professor of History), is an exploration of the relationships between science and society. In addition to the Vanderbilt faculty fellows, one visiting fellow is selected through a national competition. As a direct result of gifts given to meet the NEH challenge grant, three of the yearly awards for the Fellows Program will be named fellowships: the William S. Vaughn Fellowship; the Jacque Voegeli

Fellowship; and the Spence Lee and Rebecca Webb Wilson Fellowship.

In addition to the Fellows Program, the Center sponsors a variety of other important activities, such as interdisciplinary study groups and faculty seminars. These include Early Modern Studies; Bible and Literature; Baudelaire: Modern or Postmodern?; and A/Humanistic Writings. In conjunction with such programs, the Center is responsible for hosting several public lectures given by visiting professors. This fall the Center hosted lectures by Robert Alter (University of California, Berkeley), Clark Hulse (University of Illinois at Chicago), and Thomas Hughes (University of Pennsylvania). Invited lecturers for the spring term include Christopher L. Miller (Yale University), Katherine Hayles (University of California, Los Angeles), and Peter Stallybrass (University of Pennsylvania).

Several important programs will be among the Warren Center's activities for the coming academic year. Through a generous gift from Mr. and Mrs. Thomas Nash and Mr. and Mrs. George D. Renfro, the Center was able to establish the Harry C. Howard, Jr. Lectureship. The inaugural lecture is planned for the fall of 1995. Next year's Fellows Program will examine "*Fin de Siècle*, Millennium and Other Transitions," and will be directed by Margaret Ann Doody, Andrew W. Mellon Professor of the Humanities, Professor of English, and Director of the Comparative Literature Program. Finally, the Center anticipates a major project highlighting the 70th anniversary of the Scopes trial. Needless to say, the encouraging outlook for the Center's future would not have been possible without the support from the many generous donors who understand and support the work of the Center.

The South as an American Problem

Next fall, the University of Georgia Press will publish *The South as an American Problem*, an edited volume that grew directly from the Warren Center's 1992/93 Fellows Program of the same name. Two Vanderbilt faculty members, Larry J. Griffin (Professor of Sociology) and Don H. Doyle (Professor of History), co-edit the book. Each of the editors and seven other Vanderbilt faculty members in academic disciplines ranging from English to economics and law contribute essays, as do three other scholars of the U.S. South. The timing of the volume's publication fortuitously coincides with the inauguration of Vanderbilt's new graduate program in Southern Studies and augurs well for the program's success.

The essays move debate and discussion about the U.S. South from the issue that has preoccupied scholars in recent years—the waning cultural distinctiveness of the South—to a new and potentially more fertile area, the often troubled relationship between the South and the rest of the nation. Each contribution, in particular, attempts to understand why the South, at particular times and in many ways, became defined as an American problem. The unifying theme of *The South as an American Problem* is that the American South, more than any other region of the United States, has often been defined—occasionally by Southerners, but most often by those outside the region—as being at odds with the mainstream of American values or behavior, and therefore has been constructed as a special problem. Because the fate of the nation was and remains unalterably bound to the fate of the region, however, “the problem of the South” has also always been America's problem, understood most often as a blight on the broader cultural and political landscape and something that must somehow be addressed and solved.

Each contributor to the volume addresses a significant aspect of America's Southern problem: how it has been perceived, defined and constructed; the remedies offered in response to each characterization of the problem and some of the consequences of those solutions; how the problem was experienced by those closest to it and how that experience, in turn, became the basis of a strong and vibrant culture; and the possible end of the South as an American problem. What the volume calls America's Southern problem can be seen in the bitter tone and argumentative content of exchanges between nation and region and in every institutional and interpersonal expression of Southern life. It has shown itself through the painful autobiographical explorations of Southerners, black and white, who have searched for their identity and their place, striving all the while to “explain” and “tell about” the South. The “Problem South” has been both created in and perceived through disparate cultural prisms—ranging from mediocre Hollywood movies and television programs to some of the most profound fiction written in the twentieth century—that refract contradictory images and stereotypes, some seemingly favoring or justifying the South, others damning or ridiculing it. America's Southern problem can be seen in the region's religious expressions and intellectual routines, its economic and political institutions, its migration patterns, and most starkly and tragically in its racial practices and struggles. The editors and several authors are quick to acknowledge, however, that just as the South is conceived to be distinct from, and opposite to, the rest of America, so, too, has the nation used the South to help expose and modify some of the darker impulses of American culture. Because the book is really about the U.S., at least as much as it dwells on the South, the essays should also

prove significant for those with an interest in American history and culture.

Comprehending and making sense of all of this was clearly beyond the ability of any one academic specialty. Thus from its very inception, the volume was designed to welcome and embrace insights from a wide range of disciplines. Each of the authors brought to this collection their personal experiences and the insights and viewpoints of their academic disciplines, and each specific topic they explored—slavery, for example, or the South's late economic development, or its portrayal in literature—was examined from a number of scholarly traditions and with dissimilar research tools. Wrestling with a theme whose origins and ramifications are as pervasive as “The South as an American Problem” virtually mandated that the contributors integrate historical and contemporary questions, fact and interpretation, and social science and humanistic analyses. Each of them, moreover, had to transcend the rather narrow limitations of their respective academic disciplines and to learn from one another and from intellectual perspectives other than their own.

It is exactly this interdisciplinary character that fueled the original 1992/93 Fellows Program. The majority of the authors, in fact, were participants in the faculty seminar that included Robert A. Margo (Department of Economics), Michael Kreyling (Department of English), Eric J. Sundquist (Department of English, now at U.C.L.A.), David L. Carlton, Joyce E. Chaplin, and Don H. Doyle (Department of History), James W. Ely (the Law School), and Larry Griffin (Department of Sociology). In addition to these Fellows Program participants, the book includes essays from historians James Oakes (Northwestern) and Hugh Davis Graham (Vanderbilt) and from John Egerton, a well-known Nashville writer who has analyzed

the South for a quarter of a century.

Few do not know that in 1930 another group of Vanderbilt scholars produced a belatedly influential analysis of Southern culture, *I'll Take My Stand: The South and the Agrarian Tradition*, a book often regarded as the origin of Southern Studies. The essays that constitute what has become known as the “Agrarian Manifesto” were written to advance the notion of the rural, agrarian South and to defend that construction against the forces of “industrialism” and modernity in the North. Contributors to *I'll Take My Stand* included Allen Tate, John Crowe Ransom, and Robert Penn Warren, all of whom would later become leading figures in Southern literature and literary criticism. *The South as an American Problem* has, as one might expect, already been compared to *I'll Take My Stand* by referees commissioned to evaluate the more recent volume for the University of Georgia Press. But in their editorial introduction to *The South as an American Problem*, Griffin and Doyle state that their contributors had no intention of either echoing or answering their predecessors and that in motivation, political sentiment, and execution, the recent project is in many ways the opposite of that of the Agrarians'.

The South as an American Problem is due to be released on the eve of the seventieth anniversary of the Scopes trial and is expected to be the topic of a panel discussion at the Tennessee Humanities Council's next “Southern Festival of Books” in October 1995. These factors, as well as the merits of *The South as an American Problem*, place the book squarely at the center of the emerging Southern Studies movement and represents an important symbol of Vanderbilt's continued nurturing of the study of Southern culture.

SPRING 1995 SEMINARS

Baudelaire: Modern or Postmodern?

As a canonical writer whose works are persistently cited in studies of both modernism and postmodernism, Baudelaire helps us address concerns ranging from mass culture to multiculturalism and from the fragmentation of subjectivity to the proliferation of technology. This seminar will attempt to reconsider Baudelaire's place(s) in postmodern thinking. Most of the readings will come from Baudelaire's own works with emphasis on *Le Spleen de Paris* [*Paris Spleen*] and *Le Peintre de la Vie Moderne* [*The Painter of Modern Life*]. Christopher Miller (Department of French, Yale University) will meet with the seminar at noon on March 23 and will give a public lecture at 4:00 p.m. Co-sponsored by the Baudelaire Center, the seminar will be coordinated by Professors Margaret Miner and Claude Pichois of the French Department. The seminar will meet at 4:30 on the following dates: January 25,

February 8, February 22, March 23 (at noon), and April 5. *Note: Please call the Center for information regarding the readings for the first seminar meeting.*

Bible and Literature. The seminar will examine: 1) the use in biblical studies of literary theories and methodologies and 2) the use of the Bible in literature as studied by specialists of literature. Meike Bal (University of Amsterdam) will meet with the seminar in April. Spring semester meeting dates and times to be announced. Seminar coordinator: Daniel Patte (Department of Religious Studies).

Early Modern Studies Group. The theme for the year-long seminar is "Visual Representation and Material Culture: Tropes, Traditions, and Traits." Peter Stallybrass (Department of English, University of Pennsylvania) will meet with the seminar on February 16 and will present a public

lecture on February 15. The seminar will meet at the Center at 12:15 p.m. on the following dates: January 26, February 16, March 2, March 30, and April 13. Seminar coordinator: William Engel (Department of English).

Faculty Luncheon Group. Faculty members are invited to meet at the Center for work-in-progress presentations on the following dates at noon. Brown bag lunches are welcome; the Center will provide beverages. The seminar will meet at noon at the Center on the following dates: January 16 and 23; February 6 and 20; March 13 and 27; and April 10. Speakers for the sessions will be announced. Seminar coordinator: Bev Asbury, University Chaplain.

Great Works Series. The purpose of this seminar is to learn about and discuss landmark works that we are all familiar with but may not have read in many years—or may not have read at all! Partici-

pation in all sessions is not required; if you are interested in only one of the books to be discussed, please feel free to attend only that session. The seminars will meet on Fridays from noon – 1:30 p.m. Brown bag lunches are welcome; the Center will provide beverages. Please call the Center to sign up for seminar participation. The seminar coordinator is Jim Lang of the Department of Sociology. Meeting dates are:

Friday, February 10 and Friday, February 17: *Origin of the Species*, Charles Darwin. Gisela Mosig, Professor of Molecular Biology and Fellow, Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities, will lead the first session on Darwin. Douglas R. Cavener, Professor of Molecular Biology, will lead the second session.

Friday, March 31 and Friday, April 7: *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, Harriet Beecher Stowe. Michael Kreyling, Professor of English, will lead both of these sessions.

THE ROBERT PENN WARREN CENTER FOR THE HUMANITIES

Center Staff

Paul H. Freedman
Director

Mona C. Frederick
Assistant Director

Robert D. Richardson
Editor

Sherry Willis
Secretary

Letters is the semiannual newsletter of the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities at Vanderbilt University, Box 1534 Station B, Nashville, Tennessee 37235, (615) 343-6060/FAX (615) 343-2248. For more information concerning the

Center or any of its programs, please contact the above address.

Statement of Purpose

Established under the sponsorship of the College of Arts and Science in 1988 and renamed the Robert Penn Warren Center for the Humanities in 1989, the Center promotes interdisciplinary research and study in the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences. Members of the Vanderbilt community representing a wide variety of specializations take part in the Center's programs, which are designed to intensify and increase interdisciplinary discussion of academic, social, and cultural issues.

Advisory Committee

Jay Clayton
Professor of English
Margaret Ann Doody
Andrew W. Mellon Professor of Humanities; Director, Comparative Literature Program
Jean Bethke Elshstain
Centennial Professor of Political Science and Professor of Philosophy; Director, Program in Social and Political Thought
Paul H. Freedman
Professor of History
Michael P. Hodges
Professor of Philosophy

Christopher H. Maurer
Professor of Spanish; Chair, Department of Spanish and Portuguese
William H. Race
Professor of Classics

Ex Officio:
Madeleine J. Goodman
Dean, College of Arts and Science
Russell G. Hamilton
Dean, Graduate Studies and Research

Vanderbilt University is committed to principles of equal opportunity and affirmative action.
Published by University Publications & Design 1995.
Photographs: David Crenshaw, Gerald Holly