

# THE NEWSLETTER OF NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY'S CENTER FOR THE WRITING ARTS

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FEBRUARY 1996

## DIRECTOR'S LETTER

### *Timely Observations*

By Gary Saul Morson  
Frances Hooper Professor of the  
Arts and Humanities  
Professor of Slavic Languages  
Director, Center for the Writing Arts

I recall a composition teacher once telling me: "I used to say to students, don't strain after effect, just write as you speak. Then I realized: they do." Good writers don't write as they speak, except to the extent that they have learned to speak as they write. For better or worse, speech is more or less spontaneous, but writing does not have to be. It can be revised, and anyone who has taught writing understands the importance of revision.

We do not edit our daily conversation. The instantaneous editing that takes place as we speak is all we can do. No matter what lapses we have committed, and no matter how much we may wish something unsaid, we cannot take it back. But writers can. They read their drafts over, imagine different readers' reactions to what they have written, and revise, perhaps many times. If they are composing a novel, revision will enable them to compose an intricate plot, where (ideally) every detail, each incident, fits into a harmonious structure. If they fail at this, the novel is usually regarded as flawed.

A novelist, in short, usually knows the story in advance. It is written from the ending, with the structure of the whole in mind. That is why readers can be confident that each detail matters, or it would not be there. Life is not like that. In a novel, if the hero gives a pie to a convict at the novel's beginning, it will figure in the end. But none of us expects such consequences from our daily donations.

And yet, not all writing is novelistic in this way. All one has to do is speak with journalists often, as participants in CWA activities do, and it becomes apparent that journalistic stories are told in process, without any knowledge of the end or any hope

of being able to tie up all details. A new, popular historical form — *The Chronicle of the Twentieth Century*, *The Chronicle of the French Revolution*, and similar books — attempts to recapture the excitement of the open present as it happened by producing "newspaper clippings" supposedly reporting events as they happened. But of course such post-fact clippings, written with later events already known, can never match the true openness and excitement of journalistic prose, any more than a later account of a football game can ever capture the excitement of being there.

I was moved to reflect on these differences when studying how Dostoevsky, who was also an accomplished journalist, wrote his serialized novels such as *The Idiot*. Living abroad so as not to be arrested for debt, having no money to pay his hotel bills, having obtained as many advances as he could, and having pawned even his wife's linen, he just wrote sections of the novel and sent them off with no idea how it would continue. His notebooks read like journalistic investigations, because he really didn't know what would happen next. *The Idiot* is therefore anything but neat, and yet it seems to rise above its flaws, or, rather, to turn them into virtues, because Dostoevsky — somehow — managed to capture the excitement of a breaking story.

Different modes of writing, in short, presume different temporalities. I imagine that an understanding of the different conditions of various trades — the deadline as a creative fact, the length of a serialized installment, and similar facts — would tell us a great deal about the various creative energies at which Northwestern writers have excelled. Such an exchange would be one of many ways in which the interaction of schools, departments, and creative experiences would be illuminating. ♦



## MARK YOUR CALENDAR..

You are cordially invited to the following events sponsored by the Center and open to the public:

**Thursday, February 15, 1996, 12:00-1:00 p.m.**, Third Thursday Writers on Writing Brown-Bag Presentation "The Art of Adaptation: Finding the Play Inside the Novel" by Frank Galati (Performance Studies). Fisk 207.

**Thursday, March 28, 1996, 12:00-1:00 p.m.**, Third Thursday Writers on Writing Brown-Bag Presentation "Writing for and about Theatre: Expressing the Non-Verbal in Words" by David Downs (Theatre). Fisk 207.

## RECENT CENTER EVENTS

### *Winter and Its Contents*

By Kathie Marshall

The Center for the Writing Arts has been blessed with many delightful visitors and activities despite the snows of November and January. The brown bag lunch program in November featured Kathryn Montgomery Hunter (NU Medical School) on "Narrative in Medical Knowledge." She spoke to a small but earnest group about the role of physician as story teller. She emphasized the importance of language interpretation as a diagnostic tool for the skilled physician. And she argued that medicine is an investigative but imprecise science, which depends on both the listening to and the telling of events and symptoms for its successful conclusions.

In January, Peter Hayes (CAS History's Alfred W. Chase Professor, and an active and energetic member of the Center's Colloquium committee) talked to a brown bag gathering about "The End of Style," addressing the contemporary scope and direction of the writing of history. Hayes is the author of several books on contemporary Germany, in particular about the Nazi Era and the Holocaust.

The "Narrative and History" Colloquium brought two additional speakers to Northwestern in January. On January 11, Henry Turner, Professor of History at Yale

*Continued on page 3*

## NORTHWESTERN'S NOTABLE WRITERS

### *Ken Seeskin: Modes of Writing*

By Aimee Crawford

*Serving as chair of Northwestern's Department of Philosophy, Professor Kenneth Seeskin enjoys a reputation as one of the university's most accomplished and stimulating teachers. He is also the author of Maimonides: A Guide for Today's Perplexed, Jewish Philosophy in a Secular Age and Dialogue & Discovery: A Study in Socratic Method.*

"The basic inability to write" is a problem plaguing many Northwestern undergraduates, according to Philosophy Department Chair Ken Seeskin. "Too many times, writing courses for undergraduates are taught on a small basis by someone with no particular expertise in the teaching of writing," he says. But a new, innovative writing course offered through the Center for the Writing Arts, "Modes of Writing: Social Order and the Right to Dissent," is an attempt to change that.

Open only to freshman, the two-quarter course helps students develop writing skills through discussion, analysis and extensive writing assignments. Required reading material addresses the moral problem of dissent in society from classical to modern times. "This offers a new way to teach writing that stresses the connection between writing and critical thinking," he says. "It combines the teaching of writing and the critique of writing."

The course is intended to help students develop writing skills by focusing

on values and freedom of speech. "It is not pure rhetoric," says Seeskin. "We focus on the importance of revision as part of the writing process." There is an emphasis on the need to learn how to write in a variety of genres, says Seeskin, including analysis, descriptive, personal essay, argumentative as well as standard expository writing. Limited to 40 students, the class employs a "team teaching" approach, with representatives from several NU programs. Robert Gundlach, director of the Writing Program; Barbara Shwom, senior lecturer in the Writing Program; and George Harmon, Medill associate professor, join Seeskin in directing lectures and discussions.

The subject matter of the course continually revolves around the issue of free speech. Course material will include readings of "highly controversial" works of philosophy, theology, literature and Supreme Court cases. Readings range from Sophocles and Plato to Wolff and Catherine MacKinnon. Each issue will be treated both historically and ideologically. Students meet twice a week as a group and break down into smaller groups on other days to deal with writing critiques.

This will serve as their "common experience," says Seeskin. They will also hear from various "spokespeople" with different backgrounds and points of view—such as a journalist's perspective on free speech, and a law school representative's insight on interpretation of the first amendment.

Seeskin first came up with the idea for the course several years ago, as a result of "my own dissatisfaction with the way writing is taught to undergraduates," he says. "There's very little emphasis on revision," he adds. "Students generally write for one person—their instructor. In this class, they'll write for review by several people—people with differing backgrounds and perspectives." The course will expand upon the traditional focus in standard expository writing as it is taught in undergraduate writing courses. Seeskin, himself an accomplished author, does not plan to incorporate any of his own works into the course. "My own books are really not a part of this," he explains. "There are plenty of other works to be examined within this course. And as far as I know, there is nothing else like this." ♦

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## UPCOMING PROGRAMS

### *A Spring Festival*

By Kathie Marshall

During the late Winter and Spring of 1996, the Center for the Writing Arts will sponsor a plethora of events and courses including a four day festival on science writing, monthly brown bag lunches at Medill (see "Mark Your Calendar," Page 1), the second quarter of the Freshman Writing Seminar, and two sections of the "The Art of Fiction."

We are most gratified that local novelist Larry Heinemann, winner of the National Book Award in 1987 for *Paco's Story*, has agreed to teach as Distinguished Visiting Writer (along with humorist and playwright Jules Feiffer) in the Spring. Mr. Heinemann may be best known for his chronicle of the Vietnam Years, *Close Quarters* (1977), but his versatility as a short story and non-fiction writer will be especially valuable to those NU undergraduates who embrace experiments with genre. Jules Feiffer's course, "Humor and Truth," will include the opportunity to view films that he has been involved with as screen-writer. Both the

courses listed as "The Art of Fiction" will be open to undergraduates from every college on campus. The application process is underway, and those students selected (each course is limited to fifteen students) will be notified before the February 20th pre-registration date for Spring classes.

Forty students are currently enrolled in the first quarter of a two quarter Freshman Writing Seminar "Modes of Writing: Social Order and the Right to Dissent." (see "NU Notable Writers," above).

Professor Mark Ratner (CAS Chemistry), Donna Leff (Medill) and a committee of faculty along with two students from the CAS Scholars Program, are planning a series of lecture-presentations by prominent writers in and on the sciences. The speakers will include science fiction writers, humanists, life scientists, and possibly someone from the interdisciplinary area of science/tech writing. ♦

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## KEN SEESKIN, AN EXCERPT...

*What follows is an excerpt, "Philosophy as Idolatry," from Maimonides: A Guide for Today's Perplexed. Copyright 1991 by Kenneth Seeskin. All rights reserved.*

Throughout this chapter I have argued that God does not resemble an animal, a material object, a material force, a person, or a heavenly body. To the question, "What does God resemble?" the only valid reply is: nothing. As we have seen, next to God, everything else in the universe counts for naught. If this is true, then how can a fallible creature conceive of God?

Our language, thought, and scientific theories are designed to deal with ordinary objects: plants, animals, people, material forces, and the like. If God does not resemble any of these things, how can we hope to understand God? How can we find the terms to describe something that is utterly unique? For each time we compare God to something in our experience, we will defeat our purpose.

To see the problem in another light, consider the following dilemma. Knowledge often implies control. Hundreds of years ago electricity was considered a strange and unpredictable force; now that we have a better understanding of it, we can generate it, store it, transmit it, and turn it on or off at will. The result is that electricity has become a normal part of our lives. In this day and age no one is thrilled by turning on a light switch or amazed at the phenomenon of recorded sound.

If the same is true of God, the more we know about God, the more mundane God will seem. If God can be described in terms that apply to ordinary objects, our idea of God will resemble our idea of ourselves, and once again we will fall prey to idolatry. By contrast, the more we emphasize God's uniqueness, the less we will be able to know about God. Unlike electricity, God will fit no category and fall under no scientific law. It follows that no matter how we think of God, we face a trade-off between uniqueness and intelligibility: emphasize one and we compromise the other.



The traditional Jewish response is to come down on the side of uniqueness. According to Maimonides, all attempts to grasp the essence of God are bound to fail. We can better understand his position by returning to Exodus 33. Moses' request to see the face of God represents the human desire to know God in every detail. When God says that the request cannot be granted, the point is that a part of God will

always be shrouded in mystery. We can see the world God created and make an effort to obey the commandments God handed down, but the inner workings of the creator, the essence of God, will always be beyond our ken. If Moses could not see God up close but had to hide in a rock, how much more removed are we? It could be said, therefore, that faced with the trade-off between uniqueness and intelligibility, Maimonides sacrifices intelligibility.

In his words, the purpose of the sacred books is not to prevent us from knowing the things science can describe but "to make it known that the intellects of human beings have a limit at which they stop." That limit occurs when we stop talking about the world and start talking about the essence of the One who created it.

Once we have a limit, it is hard not to ask what lies beyond it. What if you could stand with Moses on the rock and steal a glimpse of the forbidden sight? What if you did apply human categories to the divine essence? Tempting as these thoughts are, Maimonides argues that we have to resist them. To push human knowledge beyond its limit is not a way of inching closer to God but a way of inviting arbitrariness and incoherence. ♦

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### *Continued from page 1* RECENT EVENTS...

University, spoke to an enthusiastic and immense audience in Harris 108 about the rise of Hitler in Germany during the 1930s. Turner is the author of four major works on Germany in the 20th century. He suggested in "History as Story: How Hitler Got to Power," that telling the story of Hitler as a narrative permits the writer of history to integrate details about those personal relationships and individual events which, over time, produced the Third Reich.

On January 18, Stephen Toulmin, Professor Emeritus of Philosophy at NU and at USC, joined a large group of admirers and friends to tell "Five Tales of Modernity, and Their Sequels." His visit was sponsored in part by the Department of Philosophy. Professor Kenneth Seeskin, chair of Philosophy at NU, introduced Toulmin, whose work has profoundly influenced

modern studies in both aesthetics and ethics. Both speakers were entertained at small receptions in their honor after the presentations. The lectures in this series will continue in February and March.

On December 4, the Center and the Department of Slavic Languages and Literatures welcomed novelist Andrei Bitov, Russia's major prose writer and author of *Pushkin House*, for a day's visit. Bitov was a leading underground novelist during the 1960s and 1970s, though his work was chiefly published abroad. The Center is indebted to poet Ilya Kutik of the Slavic department for arranging this special visit. Bitov made a tour of the NU Press with Susan Harris. He ate lunch in a private dining room at the Allen Center with a select

*Continued on page 4*

## INTERVIEW:

FORREST ON  
WRITING AT NU...

*Leon Forrest is a professor of English and African American Studies. He chaired Af/Am Studies from 1985-1994. Ralph Ellison wrote the forward for his first novel, There Is a Tree More Ancient Than Eden, and his second novel, Two Wings To Veil My Face, won the Carl Sandburg Award for Fiction. Toni Morrison wrote the introduction for the paperback of this book.*

*In 1985, the late Mayor of Chicago, Harold Washington, proclaimed April 14th as Leon Forrest Day in Chicago. Forrest's fourth novel, Divine Days, won the Book of the Year Award from the Chicago Sun Times for Fiction in 1992. Critic Henry Louis Gates said of this 1135-page work: "Simply put, Leon Forrest's massive masterpiece is the War and Peace of the African American novel."*

**CWA:** What do you believe to be the nature and promise of writing here at Northwestern University?

**Leon Forrest:** Good writing is most nourished and influenced by a sustained pattern of constant reading. Secondly, the student writer or professional scribe must learn how to incorporate the language, the intelligence, the techniques, learned from the texts he or she is consuming, into their own writing. Good writing evolves from a body of craft knowledge, in which the writer attempts to turn the imagination into a sinewy instrument of elevated expression, going far beyond the oral, or verbal daily dialogue. You must practice writing, and particularly rewriting, the way a student of the piano will go over and over a composition in order to master the meaning and tonal qualities of the work.

**CWA:** But aren't you making too much of the role of rewriting? Aren't you in danger of sapping the natural juices from your soul, by over-stating craft?

**LF:** All writers must love rewriting, the way a dancer or an actress loves rehearsals. When we go to the ballet or the theatre, we only see the finished product. We have no idea of the countless rehearsals that went into the beauty of the final performance. Writing is at least this demanding and probably more draining. Mainly because writing takes a lot of intellectual energy, it is a very lonely trade. Different from acting, if you are having a down day, in rehearsals, the director or your fellow actors will come along and kick you in the shins. But no one is going to

kick you out of the bed and drive you to the word processor. I remember when I was around twenty and fell in love with many of the major poems of Dylan Thomas (at the time I wanted to be a poet). Then I discovered that what seemed to be great ease of literary eloquence in his writing was often the result of 200 revisions. And every time he'd make a change, he'd copy the poem all over again, in order to see the growth of the work. Upon this discovery, I came to wonder if I had the fortitude necessary to become a poet. But my point is, all writing demands the most acute kind of self-discipline.

**CWA:** But you are talking about the nature of good writing in a general way. What of the promise of Northwestern University of good writing and where it can lead the individual student?

**LF:** Because of the intellectual rigor of Literature courses and the emphasis placed on rewriting, our students here at Northwestern are conducted through the ritual processes of analytical thinking. Then they can move to a strength and dominion over the material they are trying to transform into writing excellence, through the

concrete steps of creating solid drafts of their themes. For faculty the problem is how to stimulate students into seeing and believing that writing can be intellectually energizing and provide the mind with a fulcrum of delight and power. We live in such a highly verbal culture, full of surface sound bites and short-cuts to intelligence. The instructor must help the students to vault over these insults to the intellect. Good writing is challenging and rewarding. Our students need to develop a command over several kinds of writing in order to compete in the ever demanding marketplace, to express themselves about issues of the heart, politics, economic and social issues, in an in-depth manner. Your own good writing, learned in the classroom and in your homework, can in turn transform the student into a most critical thinker, when he reads the newspaper, or confronts news on television each night, and knows how to cut through the blubber. So, writing power remains a distinct feature of your training here at Northwestern University. With your graduation diploma in hand, you should be able to proclaim loudly: *I can think and I can write, therefore - I am..* ♦

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## RECENT EVENTS...

group of undergraduates from several colleges and graduate students from the Slavic department. The students were delighted to get to meet and talk with Bitov in an informal and intimate setting. And then at 4 o'clock, Bitov spoke in Harris 108 on the topic of Post-Modernism in Russian Literature as an open lecture for the university community.

Saul Morson, Director of the Center for the Writing Arts, and Kathe Marshall from

the Center staff, participated in the annual Chicago Humanities Festival in November. Morson lectured on love in Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* at St. James Cathedral. Marshall and her husband Donald, who is a member of the Illinois Humanities Council, introduced author Andrew Greeley at his talk on love and marriage. The relationship with the Illinois Humanities Council is an important part of the Center's effort to reach the community beyond NU's campus ♦

## FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

To find out more about the many programs, courses, seminars, lectures, colloquia, and readings aimed at furthering the study and practice—indeed, celebration—of all forms of writing at Northwestern University, please call or write:

CENTER FOR THE WRITING ARTS  
627 Dartmouth Place, Evanston, IL 60208

(847) 467-4099

Suggestions for new programs from all interested parties are warmly welcome. Please contact Prof. Saul Morson, Director, Northwestern University's Center for the Writing Arts at (847) 467-4098; or by e-mail: gmorson@nwu.edu

## CENTER FOR THE WRITING ARTS

Saul Morson, Director (Slavic Languages)

*We would like to acknowledge the efforts of the following members of the Northwestern University community, who are serving with generosity and distinction as members of the Center's various committees:*

David Abrahamson (Medill), Kenneth Alder (History), Bud Beyer (Theatre), Delle Chatman (Radio/TV/Film), David Downs (Theatre), Elizabeth Dipple (English), Jack Doppelt (Medill), Joseph Epstein (English), Leon Forrest (African-American Studies), Reginald Gibbons (English), Jerry Goldman (Political Science), Robert Gundlach (Writing Program), George Harmon (Medill), Peter Hayes (History), T.W. Heyck (History), Mary Kinzie (English), Michael Janeway (Medill), Frances Paden (Writing Program), Roy Pea (Education and Social Policy, on leave), Ken Seeskin (Philosophy), Barbara Shwom (Writing Program), Hilary Ward (University College), Nicolas Weir-Williams (Northwestern University Press) and Michael Williams (Philosophy).