On “Inspiration” and an Ohio Swimming Hole

The two-hundred twenty-first Phi Beta Kappa (PBK) literary exercises—the beginning of Harvard's formal Commencement activities—were conducted Tuesday morning, at 11 a.m., in Sanders Theatre (view the program). The poem, “Swimming Hole, Buck Creek, Springfield, Ohio,” was presented by Henri Cole, and novelist Joyce Carol Oates delivered the oration, titled “Inspiration” (see details on both below).

During the formal business, Alpha Iota Chapter president Ann Blair, Lea professor of history and Harvard College Professor, directed the ceremonies. Lowell House co-master Dorothy Austin, Sedgwick associate minister in the Memorial Church and University Chaplain, served as chaplain of the day, delivering the invocation and benediction.

The songs performed by the Harvard-Radcliffe Collegium Musicum were conducted this year by Andrew Clark, the University’s new director of choral activities, who succeeded Jameson Marvin, who retired last year (see a photograph of Marvin conducting during the 2010 PBK exercises).

Teaching Prizes

Pope professor of the Latin language and literature Richard Tarrant conferred the PBK teaching prizes—their recipients selected from candidates nominated by the PBK undergraduates—on:

Photograph by Jim Harrison
David Ager

William C. Clark

Dudley R. Herschbach

- **David Ager** [14], lecturer on sociology and director of undergraduate studies. He is such a dedicated teacher, according to one nomination cited by Tarrant, that when Sociology 159, “Social Entrepreneurship,” was oversubscribed, Ager offered to teach it twice a week so all interested students could enroll without any sacrifice in individual attention and access to the teacher.

- **William C. Clark** [15], Brooks professor of international science, public policy, and human development, of the Harvard Kennedy School, who specializes in the intersection of science, technology, and international affairs. His students deal with real-world problems, engaging as “clients,” for instance, the Harvard University Dining Services, in order to design more sustainable, environmentally appropriate practices.

- **Dudley R. Herschbach** [16], Baird professor of science emeritus, co-winner of the 1986 Nobel Prize for chemistry, and former master of Currier House, as a “lifelong supporter of undergraduate education,” and a teacher who in his freshman seminar on molecular motors “encourages his students to think big—or, in the context of the nanoworld, to think small.”

**Honorary Members**

Marquand professor of English Daniel Donoghue [17] (a scholar of Old and Middle English) led the chapter in the
customary conferral of honorary memberships. (Joyce Carol Oates, it was later explained, earned PBK membership as an undergraduate at Syracuse, and so did not receive a superfluous honorary membership.) Two retiring faculty members were recognized first:

- **Cabot professor of American literature** Lawrence Buell [17], who studies literature and the environment. He is a 2010 winner of the teaching prize [18] and a biographer of Ralph Waldo Emerson [19], whose 1837 PBK oration, “The American Scholar,” is the most famous of the genre; and

- **Mangelsdorf professor of natural sciences** J. Woodland Hastings [20] (who was master of Pforzheimer House for two decades). Donoghue said that, given his colleague’s extensive research agenda, ranging from bioluminescence to (of late) circadian rhythms, it was a wonder that Hastings ever got any sleep.

Three members of the fiftieth-reunion class of 1961 were also made honorary PBK members:
Deborah Pavan Langston, professor of ophthalmology at Harvard Medical School, who noted in her fiftieth reunion report that at Cornell, she was one of five women in a medical class of 105—and that the ratio became more skewed once she began her residency (as the only woman to that date admitted in the 200-year-plus history into Harvard’s ophthalmic surgical program at Massachusetts Eye and Ear Infirmary—and she was accepted only after a grueling day-long interview, to which male applicants were not subjected). Today, she notes, 64 percent of the infirmary’s residents are women. Her award
was greeted with particularly loud, sustained applause.

- Dennis Wilson Moore [22], Ph.D. ’68, leader of the ocean climate research division of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory [23], based in Seattle, where, he reports, he also sings with the Seattle Chamber Singers, rows in a Pocock 2000 cedar single, and plays “a little poker”; and

- Joel A. Sachs [24], pianist, conductor, and teacher at the Juilliard School, in New York, where he helped create the New Juilliard Ensemble [25], focusing on new music (it has premiered nearly 90 pieces [26]), while co-directing the professional ensemble, Continuum [27].

The Poet

Photograph by Jim Harrison

Henri Cole

PBK vice president Logan McCarty, lecturer on chemistry and chemical biology and on physics, introduced and conferred honorary membership on poet Henri Cole [28], who was Briggs-Copeland Lecturer at Harvard from 1993 to 1999, teaching poetry writing, and who will offer an undergraduate poetry workshop as a visiting professor this coming fall. He became a professor of English at Ohio State University [29] four years ago, and assumed the position of poetry editor of the New Republic last summer.

Cole, who was born in Fukuoka, Japan, and raised in Virginia, pursued his undergraduate education at the College of William and Mary, and subsequently earned his M.A. from the University of Wisconsin and his M.F.A. from Columbia. His volumes of poetry in English include Pierce the Skin, Blackbird and Wolf, Middle Earth (a finalist for the Pulitzer Prize in 2003), The Visible Man, The Look of Things, The Zoo Wheel of Knowledge, and The Marble Queen. In a biographical note at the Academy of American Poets website [31] (he was executive director from 1982 to 1988), Cole is quoted as writing of his work, “In my own poems, I have grown accustomed to astringency; there is no longer any compulsion to hide or temper the truth, as there was when I was setting out twenty years ago. I do not want to relive what I have felt or seen or hoped along the way, but I do want to extract some illustrative figures, as I do from the parables in the Bible, to help me persevere each day at my writing table, where I must confront myself, overcome any fear of what I might find there, and begin assembling language into poetry.”

He has won a Guggenheim Fellowship, the Berlin Prize of the American Academy in Berlin, the Rome Prize in
Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, and a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Fellowship, among other honors.

McCarty reported that, when asked what he looks for in a poem, Cole had said, “There has to be a commitment to emotional truth, and a little emotional concerto of consonants and vowels.”

A new collection, *Touch*, forthcoming this September from Farrar, Straus & Giroux, concludes with “Swimming Hole, Buck Creek, Springfield, Ohio,” the poem he chose to read at the Literary Exercises. From the publisher’s catalog description of the volume:

In his new book, *Touch*, written with an almost invisible but ever-present art, he continues to render his human topic—a mother’s death, a lover’s addiction, war—with a startling clarity. Cole’s new poems are impelled by a dark knowledge of the body—both its pleasures and its discontents—and they are written with an aesthetic asceticism in the service of truth. Alternating between innocence and violent self-condemnation, between the erotic and the elegiac, and between thought and emotion, these poems represent a kind of midlife selving that chooses life. With his simultaneous impulses to privacy and to connection, Cole neutralizes pain with understatement, masterful cadences, precise descriptions of the external world, and a formal dexterity rarely found in contemporary American poetry.

A personal essay, “How I Grew,” explains the origins of Cole’s art from his alienated youth as a “closeted homosexual” growing up in a family with three languages (English, French, and Armenian) and a household where “violence erupted in predictable patterns every few weeks.”

In introducing his poem, Cole said that his idol, Elizabeth Bishop, had similarly been a PBK poet; after the occasion, he said, she had written a letter to her aunt, reporting that she had heard a student saying, “Well, that was pretty good for a poem.” He hoped to do as well. His poem, a flashback to “remembered terrain” as a youth, made reference to young swimmers as “blossoming buds”—an apt image for the student honorands, he noted; but also true of the adults in the room, even those with gray hair, who are, like the undergraduates, “striving toward being.”

Watch Henri Cole read the 2011 Phi Beta Kappa poem:
The Orator

Novelist, short-story writer, essayist, and general author-polymath Joyce Carol Oates, since 1978 a member of the faculty at Princeton, where she is now Berlind professor in the humanities and professor of creative writing in the Lewis Center for the Arts, won the National Book Award in 1959 for *them*, and has been nominated three times for the Pulitzer Prize (in 1993, 1995, and 2001). Her work extends from realistic novels grounded in her youth and in the years when she lived in Detroit, to Gothic fictions, to pseudonymous suspense novels (under the name of Rosamond Smith), to essays on subjects ranging from boxing to serial killers—several dozen books in all. In introducing Oates, Ann Blair cited her “stunning energy, versatility, and productivity” as a writer. According to her Princeton online biography, “As novelist John Barth once remarked, ‘Joyce Carol Oates writes all over the aesthetical map.’” But, as Blair noted, for all the energy and work involved, writing also requires inspiration, the subject of the orator’s remarks.

Oates attended Syracuse on a scholarship, won the *Mademoiselle* fiction contest, and graduated as valedictorian. She earned an M.A. in English at the University of Wisconsin, where she met Raymond J. Smith. They married, and subsequently published together *The Ontario Review*, a literary magazine. (Her most recent book, *A Widow’s Story*, is a memoir of her late husband, who died in early 2008; read the *New York Times* review.)

Oates was awarded a National Humanities Medal this past March. The description of her work at the National Endowment for the Humanities notes, “her interests as a writer are wide, and she can go ten rounds on nearly any subject, applying her literary acumen in unexpected corners.” Of her work overall, it observes:

Joyce Carol Oates has been writing and publishing short stories and novels for more than five decades. Throughout that entire time her content and writing style have changed frequently, nearly as rapidly as her breakneck rate of production.

In her essays, she has taken up subjects both literary and nonliterary, including, most famously, boxing, and has added to her corpus plays, poetry, and a published journal. To some, she seems obsessed with writing—a charge she’d be unlikely to deny—but to nearly all, she’s one of the U.S.’s leading women of letters. Critic Harold Bloom observed that she is “our true proletarian novelist.” Book reviewer Marian Engel said, “It has been left to Joyce Carol Oates, a writer who seems to know a great deal about the underside of America, to guide us—splendidly—down dark passages.”

Regarding her lifelong love affair with reading, Oates said, “Lewis Carroll’s *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice Through the Looking Glass* with its fluid blend of dreamlike narrative and surreal fantasy, and its courageous, curious girl heroine, has probably been the book that most influenced my imaginative life. And I read it when I was so young, eight years old, I had no ‘critical’ reservations whatsoever.”

In introducing her remarks, Oates noted how beautiful the PBK ceremony was, and joked that she agreed with Henry David Thoreau—who skipped his own graduation ceremony and refused to pay the $5 fee for his diploma, to “let every sheep keep his own skin.” When she first read Thoreau, as a teenager, Oates said, she resonated to his “skepticism and idealism”—the spirit that carried over into contempt for the lessons conferred by elders, given that one simply must live life for oneself.

This was her first invitation to “orate,” Oates said, adding with a smile that she liked the idea so much she thought she might take it up as a career. That said, she noted that she had assembled an enormous volume of material on her subject, “inspiration,” and would abbreviate her remarks severely; the audience could “maybe assume that the best parts have been left out.”
Drawing upon examples from literature, Oates said she intended to speak on “inspiration” in the sense of becoming captivated by some image, phrase, or emotion. She cited Wittgenstein’s experience—“[A] picture held us captive”—as an example of an artist being haunted by her or his material: “It is something that happens to us,” not something volitional. In that sense, she said, Emily Dickinson began with some impression of beauty, and rendered it into verse that conveyed the sense of terror that seized her (“The person that I was—And this One—do not feel the same—Could it be Madness—this?”).

More benignly, she said, Herman Melville, a popular success after his first two books, began a third novel, a jocular seafaring tale, when he suddenly encountered the stories of Hawthorne and was “stunned and mesmerized” by the “blackness” he found there (as recounted in his essay, “Hawthorne and His Mosses,” about Mosses from an Old Manse). The effect was so powerful that Melville set a new course, under the influence of Hawthorne’s prose style and tragic vision, transforming his accessible work into the masterpiece Moby Dick. (Oates went on to note that the immediate result for Melville was disastrous, as the book was universally detested, and his promising career as a writer collapsed; inspiration is, she said, “double-edged.”) The inspiration, she said, had been amazing for Melville, “like a comet sailing into your orbit.”

In the case of Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley, one of a party whom Lord Byron had challenged to write ghost stories, a nightmare presented itself (not coincidentally, Oates said, given that Shelley was unmarried and again pregnant by Percy Bysshe Shelley, and so had reason to be concerned with tales of monstrous births): Frankenstein, which has never been out of print since it was published, anonymously, in 1818.

Still deriving examples of inspiration from art, Oates offered more accessible versions. James Joyce’s devotion to Dublin, she said, had produced consummate works of literature, but she had always resonated to his description of Ulysses as, in its essence, “a means of capturing the speech of my father and my father’s friends.” And of the Surrealist photographer Man Ray wandering the streets of Paris, she observed that he was searching not for any preconceived idea, but for objects that might present themselves to the artist for interpretation—an umbrella or a sewing machine out of context, for instance, yielding “a found image, a found poem.”

In this sense, she said, “inspiration is everywhere, at any time.” It need not come from within, nor need it be accessible only through suffering. Inspiration was simply waiting for one and all to encounter it.