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## An Interview with James F. Kilroy

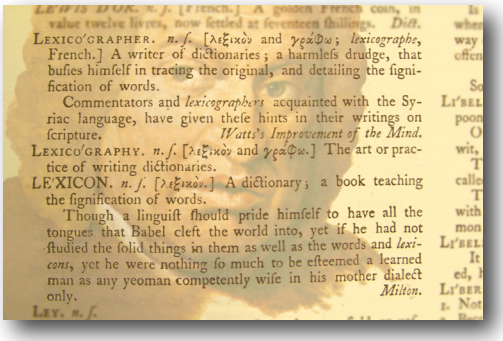
James F. Kilroy is emeritus professor of English literature in the Department of English at Tulane. A son of the Midwest, he took his PhD from the University of Wisconsin, his MA from the University of Iowa, and his BA from DePaul University. Prior to returning to the Tulane English department as a full-time teacher in 1996, Jim served not only as Dean of the Faculty of Liberal Arts and Sciences at Tulane but also as the university's Provost, teaching in alternate semesters during this time.

Before arriving at Tulane as dean in 1984, Jim taught for nearly twenty years in the Department of English at Vanderbilt University. His specializations include Modernism and Irish Literature.

In addition to his impressive teaching credentials, Professor Kilroy is well known and highly regarded as a scholar. He has published nine books, eight scholarly articles, and various reviews. His most recent book is *The Nineteenth-Century English Novel: Family Ideology and Narrative Form* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). He was interviewed by his friend and colleague, Professor Michael Kuczynski.

**Jim, we've known each other for a long time: you recruited me when you were Dean of Faculty, you then became chief academic officer of Tulane (Provost), and then returned to the English Department for several years as a full-time literature professor. What interests hold all of these various roles and disciplines at Tulane together for you?**

While the two functions of the university -- teaching and research -- are complementary, the first most directly determines its operations. Teaching and learning take place not only in the classroom, but throughout the community: in dorms, in faculty offices and labs, in dealings with alumni, and in outreach to the community. I think of administrative work as an important form of teaching: educating students about the underlying coherence of available courses of study, enabling colleagues to explore new methods of teaching, and informing alumni about changes in modes of learning. I tried to remind staff members of their important roles in fostering learning, so that the entire campus might emphasize intellectual inquiry. Even managing budgets is best approached in terms of considering what most enhances learning. In fact, I'd like to think that my own most substantial contribution as Dean and as Provost was in providing special institutional support for junior faculty members, again a form of teaching, this time by enhancing professional development. ***Cont. on page 3***


LEXICO'GRAPHER. *n. ſ.* [λεξικὸν and γράφω; *lexicographe*, French.] A writer of dictionaries; a harmleſs drudge, that buſies himſelf in tracing the original, and detailing the ſignification of words.

Commentators and *lexicographers* acquainted with the Syriac language, have given theſe hints in their writings on ſcripture. *Watts's Improvement of the Mind.*

LEXICO'GRAPHY. *n. ſ.* [λεξικὸν and γράφω.] The art or practice of writing dictionaries.

LE'XICON. *n. ſ.* [λεξικὸν.] A dictionary; a book teaching the ſignification of words.

Though a linguiſt ſhould pride himſelf to have all the tongues that Babel cleft the world into, yet if he had not ſtudied the ſolid things in them as well as the words and *lexicons*, yet he were nothing ſo much to be eſteemed a learned man as any yeoman competently wiſe in his mother dialect only. *Milton.*



## Johnson at 300

Click here to see photos of our exhibit in honor of the 300th birthday of Dr. Samuel Johnson

in this issue

Rarely do the words “political criticism” enter into a conversation about Emily Dickinson, the eccentric, reclusive nineteenth-century American poet, but Michelle Kohler, Assistant Professor of English here at Tulane, intends to introduce this very phrase into the conversation of Dickinson scholarship in an upcoming book project entitled *Dickinson and the Measure of Time*.

## Faculty Spotlight: Michelle Kohler

interview by Tess Clifton

Kohler, who received her Ph.D. from the University of Oregon in 2006, is best known by English students as the “very approachable” professor of American Poetry before 1900, American Romanticism, Whitman, Dickinson, Gender and Realism, Antebellum American Literature, and Nineteenth-Century American Literature. But what is this relative newcomer to the Tulane English Department actually writing about?

Armed with an abstract of an upcoming article of hers, I met Professor Kohler for the first time on an unusually cold February morning to find out more about her recent and current research. She greeted me with a bright-eyed smile in her airy, orderly office, only to usher me right back out. “I think we'll be more comfortable downstairs. It's still a little chilly in here.” Approachable? Definitely, and considerate, too. Resettled on a purple sofa in the English Department's lounge, I asked her to tell me about what she has been working on lately.

This past summer she finished her first book project, Miles of Stare: Vision and the Literary Imagination in Nineteenth-Century America (publication date yet to be announced). This revision of her dissertation explores the “visual metaphors” or the use of eyesight in American writing as a figure for the creation of literature in response to the “nationalist visions” rampant in the era. Kohler explained, “I was particularly interested in how so many of the writers in the nineteenth century,” including Dickinson, Hawthorne, and Douglass, among others, “[re]configured the relationship between vision and literary language.” Her conclusion: that these writers “pose alternative, but still intimate, relationships between sight and literary language.”

“The Revolution Project,” Kohler's next major scholarly work, “grew from my participation on a panel on global Dickinson” at the 2008 Modern Language Association Convention in San Francisco. The fruit of this project, an article entitled “Dickinson and the Poetics of Revolution” (set to be published in *The Emily Dickinson Journal* this year) addresses the “contrast between the notion of revolution as a linear change and Dickinson's pun of cyclical revolution,” or the rotation of the Earth: a truly global perspective. Written during the violent change that the Civil War brought, poems such as “Revolution is the Pod,” “Unfulfilled to Observation,” and “A Clock stopped,” according to Kohler, play on the word “revolution” “to critique dominant American notions of perpetual progressions towards destiny.”

Work on this article has recently led Professor Kohler to reconsider a broader, but related topic of Emily Dickinson's poetry: time. Images of clocks, watches, and time-tables feature prominently in poems in which the reclusive American poet displays a tendency to lose track of time, suspend it, or even depict deceased speakers. “In these poems, where time gets out of joint,” Kohler said, “it's usually seen as a sort of pathological distress,” or rather as symptoms of “emotional extremity brought on by crisis.” Other critics dismiss the idiosyncratic meanderings of time as a mere aesthetic function of lyric poetry. By breaking from “the tendency to pathologize, universalize, or otherwise dehistoricize” the temporal structures in Dickinson's poetry, Kohler will offer a new, uniquely historical reinterpretation in her book-in-progress, Dickinson and the Measure of Time. Essentially, she defends Emily Dickinson's depiction of time, however eccentric, by revealing Dickinson's “critical perspective. She [Dickinson] is critiquing the conventional, national notions of time with time personally experienced.”

To conclude our interview, I asked Professor Kohler, who hails from Oregon, whether she enjoys being in New Orleans.

“I really love it here,” she answered enthusiastically. Initially I suspected her response had something to do with the oddly Oregonian weather, but since the interview, I ran into her at the conference for the Society of the Study of Southern Literature in the (now delightfully warm) French Quarter, which was full of the sounds and smells of the French Quarter Festival. Only in New Orleans would a professor get to take in a scholarly conference and a free music and food festival at the same time. Whether her current concern is getting to see the Mardi Gras Indians at an academic conference, the revolution of the planet, or the hands on a clock, Michelle Kohler's refreshing scholarship re-envisions Emily Dickinson as an astute political critic and promises further insightful contributions to the field of American Literature. ♦

Revolution is the Pod
*Emily Dickinson*

Revolution is the Pod
Systems rattle from
When the Winds of Will are stirred
Excellent is Bloom

But except its Russet Base
Every Summer be
The Entomber of itself,
So of Liberty–

Left inactive on the Stalk
All its Purple fled
Revolution shakes it for
Test if it be dead.

## faculty in action

To see the rest of our faculty's newest books, papers, articles, panels, awards, and achievements, click here!

*Kilroy - Cont. from page 1*

**When you came back to the department, you quickly emerged as one of our finest teachers. Why has teaching literature been so important a force in your life? What do you get from the experience?**

Why literature? It's based on a personal conviction that literature is the most important field of study… the one that leads us to question, to reconsider, to examine life. Remember Socrates' pronouncement: "The unexamined life is not worth living." Teaching those novels, plays, and poems that raise the most fundamental questions of what we value is vitally important to educating our students. I would argue it is the very most important thing university professors do. And what is learned is essentially a skill, something our students can apply to other texts for the rest of their lives. Add to that the sheer enjoyment the teacher has in calling attention to those questions, and providing ways of talking about them. Helping students read Joyce's *Ulysses*, for instance, not only can bring them to understand and even appreciate that greatest novel of our times, but it can force them to face the fundamental issues of identity, of national allegiance, of heroism, of human relation…. Reading the most substantial works of literature can fundamentally change the way one thinks. I'm one of many who has to have books plural around all the time. The need for books is like the human need for company.

**We hear a lot at Tulane about the relationship between good teaching and research. Shortly before you retired you published another book (one of several). Was that a private passion or was it shaped in certain ways by your commitment to the classroom?**

Predictably I will say they are complementary, and I do mean it. In the most complex scientific fields the separation may be tenuous, as the research assumes a highly sophisticated vocabulary and knowledge; but in humanistic studies, one's scholarship is usually accessible to students to some extent, so that it can be taught, if only in an abbreviated, less technical mode. Of course, in all disciplines advances in what we know and can do occur with surprising rapidity, so that the professors who are engaged in research are the best informed, most engaged teachers.

**But your question includes another: why publish, why continue to do so?**

And that's another matter. Learning about literature, like learning about particle physics, is a communal enterprise, carried on by scholars who share an interest in defined subjects…. Each of them wants to keep up with what is being done in solving puzzles, unearthing relevant evidence, offering insights. It is, in fact, yet another form of teaching to participate in that dialogue among scholars. For me it was particularly important to continue that, as the years I spent in administration had allowed little time for substantial scholarship. And the main claim of the book I recently published is, beneath the sometimes complicated argument about ideology and fiction, consistent with what I repeated often in the classroom: books do influence thought, not by direct political action, but by raising questions pertinent to changing social issues.

I suppose if you like to teach, you will like to write, although, of course, the latter imposes a different kind of discipline and entails harder, more extended work. It's a challenge, as the standards for publication in academic disciplines are rigorous.

**You're one of the best people to talk books with: it's clear that reading and writing aren't simply professional concerns for you, they're deeply personal. Which past writers do you still read with avidity? Which contemporary writers are you currently reading?**

Right…. We have been talking about the communal, social aspect of literature, but it is also a personal, not very secret pleasure. First, rereading: I always thought we allowed too little time in the curriculum for rereading, because it is on the second or third reading that one really comes to see beyond the plot so as to come to terms with the text as a coherent whole. So, rereading Joyce, of course, is still a pleasure and a challenge. (Is there anyone who can say he or she has satisfactorily mastered *Finnegans Wake*?) Add Balzac and Trollope and you have a full program of texts to reconsider. Of contemporary writers I look forward to the newest novels by Joseph Coetzee, Philip Roth and Colm Toibin. The best novel I have read in a few years is by a terrific young Irish writer, Sebastian Barry; it's entitled *A Long, Long Way*. I won't go into short stories or poems for now…

**You have a long-standing interest in connections between writing and other arts forms: the theatre, for instance, and the visual arts. It's hard to think of you as "retired," but do you pursue these connections in retirement? How and where?**

The connections among the arts are fascinating, of course. But I suppose it was when I started to take classes in oil painting that I began methodically to explore the connections between the visual arts and literature. Teaching senior seminars on modernist art and literature certainly helped, and led me to think in some detail about certain connections, such as relating Beckett's texts to works by nonrepresentational painters such as Mark Rothko. More and more I am convinced that we would profit from reading modernist texts with the vocabulary and theories that we use in "reading" the works of Henry Moore or Henri Matisse.

But for fun I continue to do some drawing and painting…. It is a very satisfying kind of activity, not only because it is hard, but because pursuing non-verbal issues is such a nice counterbalance to the very literal business of reading and writing. My wife and I recently moved to a condo with great views of the river, so there are more opportunities to draw and paint, although I confess to not doing as much as I had planned.

I have been able to continue teaching in a nice way by tutoring adults in an adult literacy program. I'm currently working with a man who at age seventy-nine is determined to learn to read. What can be more satisfying than that?♦

## events

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| aug | Remembering Katrina: A Fifth Anniversary Reading |
| sep | Pierce Butler Chair Lecture Professor Robert Douglas-Fairhurst Oxford University |
| oct | Michael Ondaatje Great Writers Series |
| jan | Robert Hass Poet Laureate Series |
| mar | Josephine Gessner Ferguson Lecture |

Congratulations to
Professor Scott Oldenburg
for winning the prestigious
Martin Stevens Award
for
Best New Essay
in
Early Drama Studies

Our thanks to:

Michael Kuczynski - Kilroy Interview
Teresa Clifton - Kohler Interview
Arynne Sherouse - Design/Production
Ashlie Sponenberg - Publications Coordinator
Thomas Beller - Faculty Advisor
Barbara Ryan - Distribution

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award-winning student writing

## Boyette Prize Winners

### *Fall 2009*

Josh Micley
"Life & Times of Okonkwo"
Emily Rodkin
"East Meets West"

### *Spring 2010*

Jari Honora
"Scapegoating the Past, Sacrificing the Present"
Peter Tzioumis
"The Importance of Family"

## Academy of American Poets

### *First Place*

Sara Tobin
"Two Kids in William Blake's Garden of Love"

### *First Runner-up*

Liz Mardiks
"The First Time I Painted My Nails"

### *Second Runner-up*

Laura Proszak
"That Woman, That Putana–"

## Dale Edmonds Award in Short Fiction

### *First Place*

Lianna Patch
"The Lake God"

### *Second Place*

Joanna Kauffmann
"Cayenne Pepper, Lemon Juice, Maple Syrup"

### *Third Place*

Sara Tobin
"The Words in Your Mouth"

## Chair's News

"Exuberance is Beauty." William Blake's aphorism pretty well sums up my sense of the department's full calendar of activities and multiple achievements this spring. Here, in no particular order, are a few of our most significant accomplishments.

Four faculty members passed third-year review: Dwight Codr, Louise Hornby, Michelle Kohler, and Adam McKeown. We were able to host distinguished writers Edmund White, Phillip Lopate (in residency), Rita Dove, and Carlos Fuentes, thanks to the hard work of the Creative Writing Fund Committee and the Departmental Events Committee. The Fuentes event alone drew around 1,000 people. Eight of our Sigma Tau Delta students presented papers at the national conference: we are grateful to Megan Holt, Cat Gubernatis Dannen, and Molly Travis for their leadership of the honor society. Since our last newsletter, two books by faculty members came out in hardcover, one by Thomas Albrecht and one by myself. Numerous articles were published and conference papers were presented this spring by faculty, postdoctoral fellows, and graduate students. Seven M.A. students will graduate with the first certificate in Archival Studies and Digital Humanities offered by the department, having inaugurated the Online Countee Cullen Correspondence project: I want to recognize here the contribution of Michael Kuczynski, who brought the certificate concept to fruition, and to Tom O'Connor who helped coordinate the internships.

The Debate Education Society got off to a remarkable start: advised by Felipe Smith, in partnership with Ryan McBride's rhetoric class, it sponsored two city-wide debate tournaments for middle school students this spring. The tricentennial of Samuel Johnson's birth was marked by a stunning exhibit in the Rare Book library, created by Michael Kuczynski with the assistance of Dwight Codr and M.A. student Samantha Bruner. Joel Dinerstein instituted a workshop in American Studies, and Marguerite Nguyen, our Mellon post-doctoral fellow, has already contributed to it her work on the history of VietNamese settlement in New Orleans. We became members of the Newberry Library and Folger Shakespeare Library consortia. The arduous work of the SACS exercise gave rise to a new conception of the major, thanks to Rebecca Mark, Molly Travis, Scott Oldenburg, and Dwight Codr. We established a departmental internship structure, with a seminar led by Molly Travis and postdoctoral fellows Ryan McBride and Cat Gubernatis Dannen. Barb Ryan's persistent attention to the welfare of campus cats paid off in the new cat condominiums furnished by the University. The Media Lab renovations are all but complete, and we have almost finished our renovations of NM 202. We are sad to report that Paula Morris, who teaches fiction and screenwriting, has accepted a position at the University of Stirling in Scotland, but we wish her well and eagerly await her next book. On a brighter note, we welcomed a new member to the department's families: Louise Hornby gave birth to Philo Zebedee Hornby-Simmons.

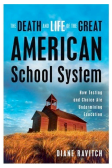
Next year promises to be even more engaging. We will mark the 5th anniversary of the disaster caused by the Army Corps of Engineers with the Katrina Poetry Symposium on August 29 which will include Pulitzer Prize winner Yusef Komunyaaka. Our Pierce Butler Chair lecturer will be Oxford University Professor Robert Douglas-Fairhurst, and "Writer's Writer" James Salter will speak in November. Poet Laureate Robert Hass will read in January. We look forward to welcoming new post-doctoral fellows and a new Visiting Assistant Professor. Finally, I am delighted to announce that renowned novelist, poet, and screenwriter Michael Ondaatje will be in residence for four weeks this fall, teaching a class for our majors. Another quotation from Blake, perhaps particularly apt for New Orleans, captures my hopes for the coming year: "The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom." ♦

Click here to see the latest awards and achievements of our post-doctoral fellows

### Summer Reading


*Divisadero*
Michael Ondaatje


*The Medusa Effect*
Thomas Albrecht




*The Death and Life of the Great American School System*

Diane Ravitch

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